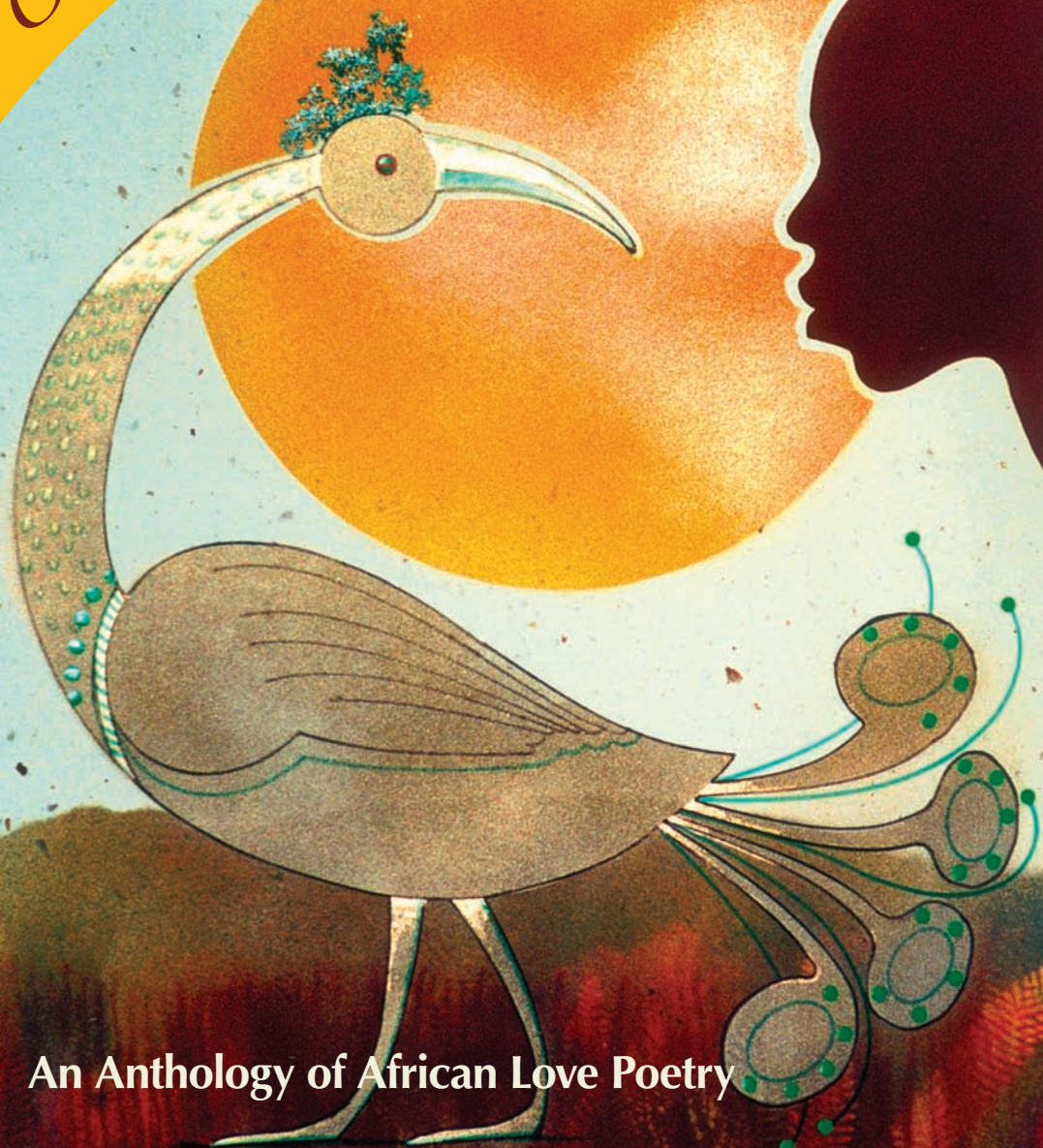


# *Bending the Bow*



An Anthology of African Love Poetry

Edited by Frank M. Chipasula

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**An Anthology of African Love Poetry**

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for my late parents  
    out of whose love . . .  
Pat, Helen, and Masauko,  
    without whose love . . .  
and also for you all  
    my brothers and sisters,  
    whose love . . .

Enrich the world,  
Make it beautiful;  
And when you are gone,  
Let the earth miss you.



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*Bending the Bow*



## Introduction: The African Names of Love

If the Egyptians were the inventors of the love-poem, and it is that, with their love of brightness and gaiety, they were, we may well regard it as one of their chief contributions to literature. . . . [I]t may safely be affirmed that up to the present no poet has written of love without saying many things which his Egyptian fore-runners thought and said three thousand years ago.

—T. Eric Peet

It is stronger than my reason,  
it is stronger than my soul,  
I am ashamed of it, but I can neither resist nor hide my disease.  
This is why I am telling you my deadly secret.  
—from “Love Defeats Queen Saran”

You have beautiful flesh  
You have beautiful legs  
You have beautiful arms  
All of you is beautiful  
You have done beautiful things, you have done beautiful  
things, girl, you have done beautiful things  
—from “Encouraging a Dancer”

*Bending the Bow* extends the parameters of African poetry into an area that has hitherto been neglected and marginalized in order to afford the reader a fuller appreciation of African literature, which has been dominated by overtly political themes and texts. It constitutes an archaeological effort aimed at reclaiming and reinstating into African literary discourse a poetic genre that is indigenous to Africa, having been invented in ancient Egypt, a fact many Egyptologists have asserted over the years. It exposes the reader to a diverse and varied body of love poetry, an important dimension that has until now been missing from the literature.

Arranged in three sections, this anthology demonstrates the development of love poetry in Africa from its origins in the anonymously written Egyptian love poems of the New Kingdom, which predate the biblical love poetry of King Solomon by over two thousand years, through the oral traditions of sung love poetry, to a showcase of modern and contemporary written love poetry in a continuum of performance that testifies to the genre’s longevity and endurance.

Love poetry's earliest manifestations are in the lyrical poetry of the New Kingdom, which boasts a written tradition in hieroglyphic script. These love poems from the Eighteenth through Twentieth Dynasties of the New Kingdom (roughly from 1300 to 1100 B.C.), which predate Homer by half a millennium, vividly evoke aspects of ancient Egyptian society, documenting for us courtship practices, young lovers' romantic trysts masked as bird-catching in the reeds along the Nile, and the penchant for feasts, festivals, and merry-making that characterized that civilization. The poetry depicts a society that prized affluence and gloried in good cheer, though we often associate it with a chronic preoccupation with death and the afterlife, owing perhaps to the popularity of the mummies. Further, the core imagery in these same love songs informs the Song of Songs, one of the world's greatest love poems, whose central metaphors, dominant imagery, and symbols betray the poem's derivation from African love songs and wedding songs.

While these poems project a spectrum of emotions, they are first and foremost celebrations of youthful unmarried love, expressions of desire for physical union with the beloved, and optimistic projections of that love into a harmonious marital future. Though driven by an intense desire for sexual intercourse with their loved ones, the lovers are often quite discreet, sneaking up to their beloveds' houses veiled in darkness and entering through windows, or employing subterfuge and chicanery to win over their intended lovers. In a considerable number of the Cairo love songs, we hear lovers' calls as the young people arrange secret trysts in the reeds by the Nile or in enclosed gardens, where the personified sycamore trees and birds are secret-sharers who promise reticence over the dalliances they witness, while others, favored by Hathor, the goddess of love, exclaim their joy at the return of a lover. However, the fact that these young lovers are secretive about their affairs and must keep their activities out of reach of their parents suggests parental disapproval of premarital sex in ancient Egypt. This is still the case in many traditional African societies, where sexuality is regulated by a complex set of taboos and their attendant punitive measures.

However, these sung love poems do not always depict individualized lovers, for quite often during the Eighteenth Dynasty and the Ramesside periods, they served as entertainment or diversion at banquets and fes-

tivities. The love songs fueled the party mood and license that permitted erotic expression, inspired in part by the presence of beautiful attendants who regaled the guests with wreaths, fragrant oils, and food and drink, urging them, on behalf of their masters, to drink excessively and to enjoy themselves fully. Thus, these sung and danced poems realized their full potential in the larger social context of good cheer, merry-making, hospitality, and ostentatious gift-giving. Apparently, within this context of relaxed morality and lasciviousness, taboos could be broken, if only in sung poetry.

Structurally, this poetry reveals a sophistication in composition that rivals its modern and contemporary counterparts. Its preference for simple diction, unrhymed lines, and variety of line length as well as its colloquial language and cadence of the speaking voices, for instance, reflect its affinities with the essential qualities of modernist verse. The conversational tone of these poems also reveals the intimacy of personal and private speech, the language of lovers, which retains its verve even today.

Powerfully erotic, the poetry portrays young women who unabashedly pursue their love objects as they express their desire for sexual union, as in the poem, “Love, How I’d Love to Slip Down to the Pond,” in which a young woman entices her lover to go and swim with her so that she may show him her “red fish” while she bewitches him with her beauty through her sheer, wet, clinging linen swimsuit, inflaming him with the following suggestive words:

But then I’d say softer,  
    eyes bright with your seeing:  
                    A gift, love. No words.  
    Come closer and  
                    look, it’s all me.

Thus, through these love songs, ancient Egypt has bequeathed to us the legacy of a healthy eroticism bursting out of energetic bodies that appear youthful more than three and half thousand years later. What the ancient teenage lovers expressed with so much boldness, candor, and eloquence reaches us today through the echoes in the metaphorical and euphemism-laden *taarab* songs of the Swahili coast. Indeed, we have to

project ourselves back into the past to encounter the precursors to the questing or pining lovers of later romantic poetry. Even the notion of love as an incurable yet pleasant malady, which dominates much of Swahili love poetry, for instance, makes its first appearance here.

From these ancient love songs, a natural progression leads to the second section, which offers a rich, though not exhaustive, sampling of contemporary dance songs, courtship songs, and wedding songs as well as other love songs from the continent's diverse ethnicities that reveal the rhythmic pulse of traditional Africa. Since the African village is a highly yet subtly eroticized environment, only those expatriates whose contacts with Africans are limited to superficial interactions with house servants will be excused for being blind to the love transactions that occur before their own eyes. Here, in abundance, is incontrovertible evidence against the assertions by some respectable African critics who have declared emphatically the dearth of love poetry in Africa, quite unwittingly confirming the colonial doubts regarding the Africans' humanity. Assailed by a rare and acute type of deafness, these august scholars have yet to hear love in *bolingo*, a Lingala term for both "love" and "beloved" that has crossed mountains and oceans with Congolese Soukous music. For more than five thousand years, the Amazigh people of the Grand Atlas Mountains, whose name means "free or noble," though the Arabs called them Berber, or Barbarians, have expressed various versions of *tayri* (love) for one another in Tamazight, a very old African language. Other African names of love include *ohole* (OshiNdonga); *chikondi* (love) and *chikondano* (reciprocal love) (ChiNyanja); *dinanga* (TshiLuba); *ife* (Yoruba); *ihunanya* (Igbo); *lolo* (Ewe); *pendo*, *mapendo*, *mapenzi*, *mahaba*, *huba*, *nyonda*, and *upendano* (mutual love) (KiSwahili); *rudo* and *chido* (ChiShona); *hera* (Luo/Dholuo); *urukundo* (kiRundi); *thando* (SiNdebele, isiZulu); *ukutemwa* (IciBemba); *chitemwa* (ChiTumbuka); and *lerato* (Sesotho). The frequency with which these terms appear in African songs testifies to the centrality of the love theme in traditional African poetry.

The Acoli love songs, though not unique, deserve special mention because of their great impact on Okot p'Bitek, one of Africa's greatest twentieth-century poets, who gathered and translated them. His exemplary archival work and rendering of traditional sung poems in English helped to inaugurate a new poetic movement in East Africa during the 1960s. His

slim volume, *Horn of My Love*, bequeathed to African literature an important treasure trove of faithfully translated Acoli love songs that retain their particular flavor, even in English. In his introduction, p'Bitek pays homage to the composers of these beautiful, sometimes bawdy courtship songs sung during the Larakaraka (or Orak) dance. Since the purpose of these dances is to enable the suitors to conduct successful courtship, the singers and dancers must display their unique skills in the arena. Performed at night, under showers of moonlight, these extremely licentious courtship dances liberate the youthful singer-lovers into making overt allusions to the sweetness of lovemaking in order to break down their potential lovers' bashfulness and to facilitate the initiation of love relations that must develop into marriage.

Similarly, a modern poetic movement in Madagascar, Africa's largest island, owes its genesis to an old traditional form of courtship poetry that has flourished over centuries. *Hain-teny*, the "formal" Malagasy classical dialogue love poetry, animates and fertilizes the love poems of such prominent Negritude poets as Jean-Joseph Rabéarivelo and Flavien Ranaivo, who consciously experimented with these oral poetic forms as a base for modern poetry. Rabéarivelo's translations, renderings, and interpretations of *hain-teny*, published as *Vieilles chansons des pays d'Imerina* in 1939, availed to French readers a rich body of dramatic courtship songs in which the lovers engage in a protracted, lyrical question-answer dialogue, which constitutes a test of the lovers' commitment. His compatriot Ranaivo also profitably exploited the rich poetic resources of the *hain-teny*, thus rooting and anchoring his poetry in the folk culture that gave it its authenticity.

Initially, the Malagasy poetry appeared to suggest structural possibilities for the third section, which showcases diverse modern and contemporary written love poetry, and thus presented me with unique problems of arrangement. Superficially, the logical order would have been to match a poem with its cultural antecedent in the preceding section, which would have been limiting, considering that both modern and contemporary African poets have often sought their literary models beyond the clan and tribe. Also, by placing northern and southern poets side by side, I have preempted the tendency among certain readers to tally offerings as a way of determining an editor's idiosyncrasies, proclivities, biases, or assumed judgment of literary worth. I have also opted for the present arrangement

in order to demonstrate the existence of subtle literary exchanges among African poets over millennia, the cross-fertilization between the poetry composed along the Nile, the Horn of Africa, and the Swahili Coast being a case in point.

Swahili poetry owes its birth to seventeenth-century poet Liyongo Fumo, a great pillar of both Swahili society and literature. Liyongo, who died around 1690, introduced into Swahili poetry the erotic *gungu* songs that accompanied wedding dances, whose impact on the literature has persisted into the contemporary period. These songs are celebrations of many aspects of love, both romantic and marital, and were sung to enliven wedding ceremonies and festivities. Another significant literary figure among the Swahili is the great Muyaka bin Haji (al Ghassaniy), a wealthy and politically powerful citizen of Mombasa, Kenya. Muyaka was the leading poet of the Swahili language whose poetry left a permanent mark on succeeding generations of the coastal poets. A successful businessman who owned a fleet of ships, his marine imagery and metaphorical reference to his first wife as his beloved vessel reveal these coastal people's preoccupation with seafaring and transoceanic trade with the islands off the East African coast and the Middle East as a source of their affluence and their literary models.

Despite these viable traditions of love poetry in Africa, contemporary written African literature has so entrenched overtly political protest poetry that one actually *expects* it from an African poet. The tragic consequence has been the stagnation and predictability of contemporary African poetry. All the same, a few seemingly political poets have also crafted memorable verses fusing politics and love. Among Léopold Sédar Senghor's Negritude poems, for instance, are some of the most beautiful love lyrics couched in praises of the *signare*, a class of noble Senegalese women. One of the most powerful, passionate, and intensely erotic poems in this anthology is David Diop's "Rama Kam." Spare and sparse, the poem is a celebration of the poet's wife, Virginie Kamara, and projects the woman as natural, beautiful, and extremely sexually desirable. Frank and bold, the poem depicts their lovemaking as the very essence and source of life:

When you love Rama Kam  
A tornado quivers

In the lightning night of your flesh  
And leaves me full of the breath of you

The images of the quivering tornado, the bolt of lightning, the exchange of intense erotic energy—breath and life itself between the lovers—lend power to the poem. Diop is not unique in his portrayal of his loving wife as nurturing. Love poetry in many African cultures exists as praise songs in which the singer-lover extols the loved one's physical and spiritual attributes and virtues. Praise singers imagine their lovers in idyllic and idealistic ways in ancient Egyptian love songs, in Swahili, in Shona, and in other poetic traditions, all of which shore up this aspect of the sung love poem.

The traditional belief that the love song is an exclusively male genre because men must conduct courtship, an important prelude to marriage, begs reconsideration. Many African folk traditions are rich repositories of women's love songs that continue to empower contemporary women poets to write some of the most ardently erotic and intensely spiritual love poetry. Ifi Amadiume's work, for instance, testifies eloquently to African women poets' accomplishments in this area. Her love poems are simultaneously sensual and sensuous as well as boldly erotic, as in "Show Me All" and "Dubem's Patience," whose personae are versed in Igbo folk philosophy and are comfortable with their sexuality. Her treatment of the sexual act as a necessary nourishment further confirms the African people's healthy attitude toward sexuality that Naana Banyiwa Horne also celebrates in "*Sore Ka Pra*: Whoopie, Akan Time," a poem that depicts the healthy everyday eroticism of Akan folk life in the sexually fulfilled women who exude sensuality and rejoice in genuine love as an important aspect of their existence in traditional African societies.

All the same, from what some of the poets tell us, it has not always been easy to love in Africa, but in some instances love has managed to triumph over the hurdles in its path. Adam Small's ballad of the tragic love between Diana, a white girl, and Martin, a black boy, in apartheid South Africa tells of love's supremacy over artificially erected racial barriers. How many such interracial love affairs ended this way in South Africa, we will never know. However, love empowers the couple to defy "de Lô" to the very end:

Said Diana, said Martin  
What Lô?  
God's Lô  
man's Lô  
devil's Lô  
what Lô

Clearly, love empowers them to choose imprisonment over obedience to an unjust "devil's Lô" that hinders human communion. They achieve victory in defeat when they commit suicide rather than submit to the irrational Immorality Act as an ultimate act of defiance of apartheid.

In "Love in a Season of Terror," Niyi Osundare's lovers must persevere and survive military dictatorship and violence as corrupt leaders place roadblocks in the path of human development. Corpses, flying mortar shells unleashed by drunken generals, lethal weapons, and utter terror separate two distanced lovers who yearn for physical union. Unfortunately for the two, the bayonet between the general's legs proves too powerful for the lovers, and they can never hope for intimacy as long as he is in power.

The often reckless and dismissive pronouncements by eminent African literary scholars regarding the paucity of love poetry in Africa have negatively persuaded international readers to regard the continent's poetry as basically political. This possibly explains the absence of African love poems from "international" love poetry anthologies. A great deal of the blame must be placed at the door of certain African scholars whose claims that love poetry is a "rare species" in Africa may have unduly discouraged editors from seeking contributions from African poets. For instance, although in her introduction to Jean Garrigue's anthology *Love Poems*, Nancy Sullivan claims that love's "landscape is international," not a single contribution from Africa appears in the book (xxxv). Could this be an accidental oversight, or the result of the writer's conviction that Africans are not composers of love poetry? "From the civilization of the Lower Nile to that of the Lower Hudson, more poets have written more convincingly, more poignantly about love than about any other subject," claims the blurb for Jon Stallworthy's contribution to the genre, *A Book of Love Poetry*, an Oxford University Press reissue of *The Penguin Book of Love Poetry*, yet "the civilization of the Lower Nile" has been completely overlooked in

the anthology. Surprisingly, only one poet with some African connection, though she may not be an African, is featured in Wendy Mulford's anthology, *Love Poems by Women: An Anthology of Poetry from Around the World and Through the Ages*. With three assistant editors involved in the project and such an inclusive subtitle, one would think that they would have found more love poems from Africa.

Could the problem lie with the editors' narrow and exclusionary definition of love that easily precludes Africa? Yet the definition of love by Jon Stallworthy hardly explains why he bypassed a whole continent, considering the availability of ancient Egyptian love poems as well as more recent crystals of folk love songs that precede his anthology. I am reluctant to accept that since Stallworthy roots his definition in the old Indo-European tongues, his reach is necessarily as constricted as the following assertion may seem to suggest: "Love [Old English *lufu*, Indo-European *leubh*, from the same root as the Sanskrit *lubh*, to desire] of the Beloved accounts for many of the most intense moments in most lives; moments generating the emotion that, recollected in tranquility, may crystallize into poems" (19). He raised my expectations further regarding the contents of his own anthology with the following statement: "Before ever man learnt to make graphic symbols of his sounds, he had his love songs as well as his war songs and his reaping songs" (21). Since all these sung poetries that Stallworthy enumerates have been present in Africa, it is perhaps not without justification that we would wonder about the absence of African love songs from his anthology. Fortunately, Jan Knappert has carefully documented some of the most beautiful African love songs in his anthologies of Swahili poetry, *A Choice of Flowers: Chaguo la Maua: An Anthology of Swahili Love Poetry* and *Four Centuries of Swahili Verse*.

By *bending the bow*, I challenge African poets to seize this musical instrument that they might play on it the love songs that accompany gift-giving among people in order to heal the breaches among us and offer us the possibility of achieving wholeness once again. Historically, African oral poets as mediators in conflicts have sung their strife-torn societies into order, quite often utilizing the bow because of its versatility as a weapon, hunting implement, and instrument for creating life-giving, life-affirming art that constitutes the essential glue in human bonds. Legendary Somali poets mediated in clan conflicts, cooling flaming hearts with their songs,

no matter how irreconcilable the differences appeared to be between the warring clans. Are contemporary African poets singing love enough to perform similar peace-keeping roles? In 1956, Swahili poet Juma Bhalo made the following claim about love:

Love is a wall  
which will stop war;  
they will not persist in discord  
who love consciously.

Considering that love of kin rather than discord once enabled us to build strong communities, the internecine pogroms in Africa are sometimes quite hard to comprehend. Isn't love the mother of genuine solidarity?

Every African community or ethnic group has a treasure trove of sung or chanted love poems, some of which have been written down since the discovery of papyrus and the invention of writing in Egypt. What is certain, however, is that because readers and scholars have persistently focused on political poetry, they have almost totally ignored and marginalized love poems while simultaneously making seemingly authoritative yet uninformed, fallacious statements about the lack of love poetry in Africa. The assertion that love poetry is rare in Africa is especially troubling, coming as it does from African literary scholars who grew up in African villages listening to or even singing these love songs they could not recognize as poetry, most likely because no Westerner had validated them.

Love, a construction of the human intellect, distinguishes us from and elevates us above other beings. The conventions and rules governing love transactions between lovers may vary from one culture to another, yet the major features of those manners are the same. And while the names of love may be myriad, the human affliction they describe has not spared many Africans.

When I began this journey quite a few rains ago, I did not set out with any preconceptions of African love poetry. From the outset, I was willing to accept a wide-open definition of love, which this anthology reflects. In one case, an Eritrean master of the poetic riddle, Reesom Haile, seduces us with a plethora of unabashedly erotic metaphors as he confesses his obsession with his favorite mistress (indeed, whose shameless daughter

would allow herself to be taken any time and anywhere like that?): coffee. Haile's witty and brazen poem suggests the immense natural metaphorical properties of the riddle and its limitless possibilities for the daring modern African poet willing to experiment with folk poetic forms in the work of renewal that awaits our indigenous literatures. The riddle is omnipresent in traditional Africa; here lies the rich ore that awaits the African image-maker's patient hands.

Finally, this anthology in no way pretends to be comprehensive, though it has been distilled from a massive body of work. Considering Africa's size and cultural diversity, any such work would be cumbersome and pose extraordinary challenges to its editor. The present anthology is merely a sampling of the rich sung and written traditions of African love poetry hitherto neglected by editors of international love poetry anthologies. I hope that henceforth, editors will heed Nancy Sullivan's claim that love's "landscape is international, its concerns timeless" and thereby enrich their books with contributions from Africa, the birthplace of both humanity and love poetry.

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*Anonymously  
Written  
Ancient Egyptian  
Love Poems*



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*Traditional  
Love Songs*



## Aandonga (Angola and South Africa)

### *Love Praise*

My dark-brown girl is like a cow,  
My light-yellow girl is like Nimuene,  
As beautiful as Schikuni or Ombago,\*  
As pretty as a delicately cut thong,  
As hides round the loins of a royal servant.  
When I wait for her, I can eat nothing,  
When I expect her, I cannot sleep,  
Sleep and food matter not to me then.  
Her fingernails are white as if they were washed,  
Her fingers, as if she had just touched fat.  
She is as bright as the ombimbo-root,  
Ombimbo, dug up by the Bushmen,  
Ombimbo, grown in the sandy desert of Amambo,  
Picked up at the root of the omusati-tree.  
My girl is like a copper ring in looks,  
My girl is serious, she does not laugh for nothing,  
She does not laugh when we are with people,  
She laughs only when we are alone together.  
Each time I look into her face  
It is as if the sun rose newly.  
When I have to leave her  
It is as if night came over me.  
When she goes for water, help her,  
When she treads grain, tread for her too,  
When she goes to sow, sow for her too,  
When she walks about, carry her!  
O my Nehoja, you are my adornment!  
All the young men offer you their beads.  
My treasure is the most beautiful among all strings of beads,  
She is like a delicately cut thong.  
Her mother bore her for me.  
Since she was born, she has belonged only to me.

I love her dearly even when I am asleep,  
But when I am awake, a thousand times more.

\* Nimuene, Schikuni, and Ombago are names of cows.

*Song of a Bridegroom in Praise of His Bride*

Jinkono's Namujezi, Nascheja's grandchild,  
Mpingana,\* a tree on the plain,  
A palm-tree in the possession of Schinkonjo, Nepaka's son,  
Belonged to our people of heroes. . . .  
Namujezi, you flower from Jinkono's garden,  
You plant too high to be reached!  
Her noble figure is something to marvel at,  
Her beauty turns the heads of the Aalombe,  
The people of Jikokola are ravished too.  
They run in their eagerness to give Namujezi gifts.  
Namujezi's beauty is indescribable.  
Jinkono's flower shines like a star.  
I saw her from far away, before she came to us.  
Namujezi, your eyes—how fresh-new they are!  
And your teeth—as if you had gotten them only yesterday!  
And your eyes—like those of a hornless cow!  
Namujezi, open your eyes, clear as water;  
Your teeth—just laugh, laugh out,  
So that we may see them all and marvel at them.

We will let our game sleep  
Until the morning star appears.  
I will not leave the playground so long as Namujezi is there.  
Where she is, the moon becomes the sun,  
Night becomes bright day.  
We are favorites of glorious night,  
We are court servants of the moon.  
Where you, Star-Namujezi, shine,  
I will follow you, no matter where you go.  
Well I know the signs of your passing.  
Anyone knows Namujezi, even among many women.  
She shines like the spring sun rising.  
You say: "No one can eat beauty."  
Yet I feed on Namujezi's.

\* Mpingana is another name of Namujezi's.

*Lightning, Strike My Husband*

Lightning, strike my husband,  
Strike my husband,  
Leave my lover;  
Ee, leave my lover.  
Snake, bite my husband,  
Bite my husband,  
Leave my lover;  
Ee, leave my lover.  
    See him walking,  
        How beautifully he walks;  
    See him dancing,  
        How beautifully he dances;  
    See him smiling,  
        How beautifully he smiles;  
    Listen to the tune of his horn,  
        How beautifully it sounds;  
    Listen to him speaking,  
        How beautifully he speaks;  
    See him performing the mock fight,  
        How beautifully he does it;  
    The sight of my lover  
        Is most pleasing.  
Lightning, strike my husband,  
Strike my husband,  
Leave my lover;  
Ee, leave my lover.

*Translated from the Acoli by Okot p'Bitek*

*Where Has My Love Blown His Horn?*

Where has my love blown his horn?  
The tune of his horn is well known.  
Young men of my clan,  
Have you heard the horn of my love?

The long distance has ruined me, oh!  
The distance between me and my companion.  
Youths of my clan,  
Have you heard the horn of my love?

The shortage of cattle has ruined my man!  
The poverty of my love!  
You men of my clan,  
Listen to the horn of my love.

Where has my love blown his horn?  
The tune of his horn is well known.  
Young men of my clan,  
Listen to the horn of my clan.

*Translated from the Acoli by Okot p'Bitek*

*When I See the Beauty on My Beloved's Face*

When I see the beauty on my beloved's face,  
I throw away the food in my hand;  
Oh, sister of the young man, listen;  
The beauty on my beloved's face.

Her neck is long, when I see it  
I cannot sleep one wink;  
Oh, the daughter of my mother-in-law,  
Her neck is like the shaft of a spear.

When I touch the tattoos on her back, I die;  
Oh, sister of the young man, listen;  
The tattoos on my beloved's back.

When I see the gap in my beloved's teeth,  
Her teeth are white like dry season simsim;  
Oh, daughter of my father-in-law, listen,  
The gap in my beloved's teeth.

The daughter of the bull confuses my head;  
I have to marry her;  
True, sister of the young man, listen;  
The suppleness of my beloved's waist.

*Translated from the Acoli by Okot p'Bitek*

*Love Songs*

**1.**

I sleep long and soundly,  
Suddenly the door creaks,  
Confused, I open my eyes,  
And find my love standing there:  
What matters death to me?

**2.**

It has been raining and raining,  
It has been raining and raining,  
I go out to leave my footprints:  
I see the footprints of my love.  
All footprints are not alike:  
I go out to leave my footprints  
And find the footprints of my love.

**3.**

He has two loves,  
He has two loves,  
I go to see him off.  
I meet the other woman.  
I cannot go on,  
I cannot go back,  
I burst into tears.

*Translated from the Akan by J. H. Kwabena Nketia*

*Love Song*

I painted my eyes with black antimony  
I girded myself with amulets.

I will satisfy my desire,  
you my slender boy.  
I walk behind the wall.  
I have covered my bosom.  
I shall knead colored clay  
I shall paint the house of my friend,  
O my slender boy.  
I shall take my piece of silver  
I will buy silk.  
I will gird myself with amulets  
I will satisfy my desire  
the horn of antimony in my hand,  
O my slender boy!

*Translated from the Bagirmi by H. Gaden*

*Love Defeats Queen Saran*

“Tell Da that I have heard him well,  
but I am not alone in this town;  
I will call the elders  
and let them know of his intentions.”

Duga summoned his first son and his advisers  
and reported to them Da Monzon’s words.  
They unanimously concluded  
that Da had come to fight,  
not to strengthen brotherly relations.

Duga asked for a three days’ delay  
so that his men who had gone hunting might come back home;  
Da Monzon accepted this postponement.

On the day the hunters came back to Kore,

Da was invited to partake of the mead which had been prepared in  
his honor.

Duga’s first wife, who had always heard  
Da’s exploits and good looks highly praised,  
was unable to resist the pleasure of seeing him.  
Doing so openly was forbidden;  
so she came to watch him furtively  
through the slits of a millet stem screen.

Duga’s wife watched Da Monzon.  
She was thunderstruck by his virile splendor;  
it was love at first sight and her desire was so intense  
that she lost all sense of proper behavior as well as her self-control.  
She spent a very bad night, as her flesh  
was tormented by a hunger she could not satisfy;

dark thoughts peopled her brain,  
she forgot Duga's favors,  
she forgot that she was the first queen  
of a state famous for the courage of its warriors  
and the wealth of its citizens.  
She was obsessed by one idea—  
to possess Da, to hold him in her arms, to give all of herself to him;  
she was lost without knowing it.  
Her drunken soul plunged into darkness,  
she forgot everything else,  
she wanted Da at any price.

She would go mad for him;  
for him she would betray  
the man who had never denied her anything.  
She started thinking about the best way  
to confess her love to Da and to convince him  
that she was ready to leave everybody and everything  
as long as he would belong to her.

She called the seven maids of her household,  
her trusted servants, the keepers of her most private secrets,  
always ready to sacrifice themselves for her,  
and told them, "I am grievously sick,  
I will die of this terrible disease."  
—"Mistress, how did you, between yesterday and today, catch  
so violent a disease that you fear you will die of it?"  
—"It entered through my eyes,  
then settled in my heart  
where it drained the water of serenity  
in which my soul was bathing.  
My heart is as dry as the balanza tree in the rainy season—  
it dries up despite the rains  
and turns into white wood, dead wood;  
in the same way, in spite of gold and silver, maids and servants,  
in spite of a cattle-pen filled with milch-cows,

in spite of granaries crammed with cereals,  
in spite of the greatness of my husband,  
the fearless hawk that swoops down on the enemy  
and picks him up as if he were a chick—woe is me!  
I am unhappy in the middle of all these,  
and I will die if no remedy is found!”

—“So, what is this strange disease that makes you so miserable,  
o! you, good and beautiful mistress?” exclaimed one of the maids.

—“I suffer from a love that burns more than fire,  
that pierces more than an arrow,  
that cuts more than a razor.”

—“You! in love!

You, who, by just jumping over a sick horse,  
can cure it of its diarrhea,  
you, the precious pearl that only Duga’s eyes have seen!  
No, mistress, you are trying to mislead us,  
you have always loved no-one but Duga  
and will never love another.”

—“If you do not trust my words  
and refuse to help me quench my passion,  
then get ready to heat up the water  
that will be used to wash my corpse.  
If tomorrow at sunrise  
I have no hope of possessing the one  
who prevented me from sleeping last night,  
I swear I will die before the day is over!”

The seven maids opened their eyes wide  
and silently looked at each other.  
They were wondering whether a bad spirit  
had entered their queen’s soul  
to steal her reserve and her reason.  
One of them said, “Such is our duty—  
we must find a way to cure our mistress

and do everything to save her health.”  
Kunadi, the oldest of the maids,  
told the queen, despite the rule  
that forbids to pronounce her name, “Saran,  
my good Saran, whom are you in love with?  
A genie from King Solomon’s palace  
or an heir to the throne of the Misra Pharaohs?”

—“No,” Saran answered, “the one I am in love with  
is neither a genie born of the elements nor a prince from Misra;  
he is the son of a Bambara woman,  
a stallion that has grown up on the banks of the Dioliba,  
he has played under the balanza trees of Segu,  
I am in love with Prince Da.”

—“Da Monzon! the one who has come to besiege Kore Duga?”  
—“The very same. It is stronger than my reason,  
it is stronger than my soul,  
I am ashamed of it, but I can neither resist nor hide my disease.  
This is why I am telling you my deadly secret.  
You may choose—either you help me arrange a meeting with Da,  
or you denounce me to Kore Duga;  
if you prefer the latter solution,  
know that Duga will shave my head,  
he will cover me with rough tree-barks,  
he will load me with vile chains,  
just as he has loaded me with gold, silver and precious pearls;  
you will see me stumble under whip lashes  
before my head is cut off and thrown to the carrion-feeders;  
even when my mouth bleeds, my teeth are half-broken and I die  
of thirst,  
I will refuse the water that a charitable heart  
will offer me to cool down my soul on fire.  
I will say, ‘Give me Da, it is him I am thirsting for,  
water cannot quench my soul!’”

Kunadi looked at her companions—  
all were shedding sincere tears,  
and Kunadi started crying too.

Knowing that she had deeply moved her servants,  
Saran stood up and went into the next room;  
she came out with seven snuff-boxes filled with gold  
and said, “My beloved maids, I do not know  
what tomorrow’s sun has in store for me,  
so here is a little something for each of you, so that you may live free  
in case you are reduced to poverty after my death.”

The maids received the snuff-boxes  
then withdrew where their mistress could not see them.

They started discussing how to use  
the gold Saran had given them unconditionally.

Kunadi declared, “Sisters, being a captive  
or a person of low rank  
does not exclude having a noble heart;  
never has our mistress made us feel  
that we are slaves, no better than beasts of burden—  
today, by disclosing to us

what may cause her shame and her loss,  
and by giving us the means to be free and to live at ease,  
she has shown how much she loves us.

So, what shall we do?”

Tenema, the youngest of the maids, suggested,  
“Though my years are less than the sum total  
of my toes and my fingers,  
and though I have neither lived nor seen enough  
to tell my elders what to do,  
I would like, if you allow me,  
to express what my firm conviction is.”

“We are listening to you, Tenema, for it may happen  
that in a small pond big fish are found  
that are never to be found in a lake.”

Tenema said, "I think we must stay with our mistress  
since we have benefited from her happiness;  
we must follow her everywhere and in everything;  
let us give her back her gold and let us give her too,  
besides our bodies that she already owns,  
our hearts, that belong only to us."

Kunadi cast her eyes on her companions;  
none looked down,  
all looked at her right in the eyes,  
their faces beaming with wide smiles  
that were in no way faked.

Then Kunadi said, "My sisters,  
the youngest among us, that is the one  
who has least enjoyed Saran's kind deeds,  
has just pointed to us the honorable path.  
What do you think?"

As if they were one, the maids answered,  
"Let us follow and help our mistress,  
may whatever God decides happen,  
but let us give her back the gold, let us give her back the gold!"

Immediately, Kunadi gathered the seven snuff-boxes  
and went back to Saran with her companions.  
She kneeled down in front of the queen and gave her back  
her presents that she was holding in a fold of her wrapper.  
She said, "Mistress, my sisters and I are bringing back  
the gold you have given us to protect  
our lives against adversity;  
all the gold in the world would not protect us  
against the misfortune of being separated from you.  
To us you are both life and death.  
Everywhere we shall follow you unconditionally,  
whether you go through the main gate  
or you sneak through the back door;  
since God has set a flame in your heart

for Da, we do not have the right  
to judge you and even less the right  
to try to put out what God has lit.  
Tell us what we must do, and we shall do it,  
tell us what we must say, and we shall say it.”  
Saran wept for joy and gratitude.

Saran took out a long roll of cotton strips  
and said, “You will help me climb over the town wall.  
This very night I will go to Da  
and declare my love to him.”

The eight women stole away in the dark.  
They arrived at the bottom of the wall  
in a quiet, seldom watched place.  
Saran unfolded the cotton roll  
and made a strong and thick rope with it.  
She climbed on the shoulders of one of her maids  
and heaved herself on the top of the wall;  
she then threw one end of the rope to her maids  
and took hold of the other;  
she let herself slide down the wall  
like a bucket that is lowered into a well,  
while her maids were counterbalancing her on the other side.  
Saran landed with a few scratches,  
she shook the rope and her maids pulled it up.  
Three of them followed suit  
and the remaining four stayed inside  
to be on the lookout before the queen returned.

Saran and her companions went up to Da’s camp.  
A guard saw them and was about to raise the alarm  
when he discovered that they were women.  
He asked them, “Who are you? Where are you coming from?  
Where are you going and what are you looking for?”  
Saran walked to the guard and said,

"I will answer but your last question—  
I am looking for Da Monzon, go and inform him.  
I will wait here with my companions."  
Before the sentinel could ask her another question  
Saran slipped one of the seven snuff-boxes to him,  
saying, "Taste my tobacco,  
even though it comes from a woman, you will appreciate it;  
I am the one who prepared it, take a pinch and go."  
The guard, just by weighing the puff-box,  
understood that it contained some metal.  
He ran to Da's camp and reported to him.  
Da thought for a while. He told himself  
that four women in the middle of the night  
were a mystery wrapped up in a mystery!  
Da jumped to his feet and followed his guard without saying anything  
to his advisers who were deeply asleep.  
When he reached the place where the four women were waiting for him,  
the perfume that filled his nostrils made him understand  
that he was dealing with a woman of quality  
or, at least, an expert courtesan.

"Good evening, ladies!" Da called cheerfully.  
The three maids discreetly stepped backward  
and walked away so that Saran and Da  
might converse freely.  
The guard did the same  
and Da remained face to face with Saran.

Saran said, "O! Da! usually it is the suitors  
who climb walls to go and offer their hearts  
to the lady-loves they sigh for!  
This evening, it is the reverse. This is not surprising for there is  
no Bambara girl who does not dream of you, o! Da!  
All sing your bravery and your dazzling good looks.  
All would like to see you, to talk to you, to listen to you.  
The other day I could not help hiding

behind a screen in order to listen to you and to have a look at you.  
I should never have done so, for then  
the devil who has haunted me ever since and cruelly spurs me on  
to jump over dangerous obstacles, like the trumpet bird,  
would have left me in peace.  
But the faintest glimmer of love overcomes  
the shadow of convention, however thick it may be.  
How many women in love have braved  
the darkness of night, rejecting their duty  
and dragging their honor in the mud,  
to go and find the master of their soul,  
the man they would have liked to marry?  
I am just another of them,  
and I have come, without any shame, to knock at the door of your heart.  
Open it, that I may enter it, or have me stabbed  
so that, at least, I may die in your arms."

"Who are you, noble daughter of my own race?  
Which court have you fled to come to me?"

"I am Saran, Duga's wife."  
"You are Saran, Duga's favorite wife, and you . . ."  
Da could not go on.

Saran said, "Pleasure for a woman  
is not to be adorned with gold and silver,  
neither is it to be a monarch's favorite wife,  
but it is to live in a simple house  
with the man she has chosen.  
Such is my case—I am worshipped but unhappy,  
I am under constraint but I would like to be free,  
free to love the one I love."  
Da, realizing that he had, then and there,  
a means to learn Duga's most intimate secrets, said,  
"Saran, I know you will not accept  
to give yourself to me as if you were a courtesan.

We would commit a moral outrage unworthy of us.  
But let us be allies, help me;  
as soon as I have defeated the so far invincible Duga,  
I swear on the spirits of my ancestors  
that I will make you the woman you want to be.  
So, in front of the whole world, my heart will answer  
your heart, that has made me the man you desire.  
I shall therefore take you as my spouse,  
I shall keep you like a precious treasure  
and you will be mine, and mine only.”

These words were a solace to the soul and the mind of Saran,  
they appeased the heat that propelled her irresistibly forward,  
but they fanned in her another fire—  
must she betray the man who had married her  
against her will, in fact, because she was his subject?  
A terrible deal had just been struck  
without any witness, between the queen of Kore  
and the man who wanted to become its king.  
Saran said, “Let us meet again in Kore.  
I wish you a good night, o! Da Monzon!”  
The two lovers went their separate ways, certain that their secret  
was protected by the loneliness of the place  
and the deep darkness of the night.

Saran joined her three maids.  
She told them, “Let us hurry back to the town before the first cocks  
announce the break of day, that revealer of nightly secrets.”  
The maids perceived in their mistress’s voice  
the joy she had felt in her heart.  
No need to know more, they did not ask any question.  
The four women walked back to the wall;  
with their hands and their feet, they went back the way they had come.  
The girls who were on the lookout were still there, on the alert,  
and ready to do everything to cover up their queen’s escapade.

*Translated from the French by Jacques-Noël Gouat*

*Women's Song*

O handsome Sokoti, O handsome Sokoti, O pretty youth,  
Take me and let us go, yes, O master, take me and let us go!  
Take me and let us go to the ford across the Agbagnian,  
Take me and let us go quietly as far as the ford across the Agbagnian.  
O Sokoti, O pretty youth,  
O master, take me and let us go, take me and let us go as far as the ford  
across the Agbagnian.

*I Want to Be with My Love in a Garden*

I want to be with my love in a garden  
surrounded by pavilions with lovely cushions.  
In its center are fountains and water  
jetting up like milk.  
The nightingale glorifies the orchard  
and its seven-colored pears  
with songs.

A young man goes from room to room,  
gracefully.

The jasmine drops its branches.

Sitting by my friend,  
I will be healed.

*Translated from the Arabic by Willis Barnstone*

*I Want to Be in a Garden with My Love*

I want to be in a garden with my love,  
empty. Not even a gardener.  
I want to be in a bath with my love,  
empty. Not even a masseur,  
and I will bring him all the hot and cold water  
he wishes.  
Even his sweat I'll collect and put in flasks  
so it will make me alive.  
The day I am blind from crying,  
I will paint my eyes with tears instead of *khol*.

*Translated from the Arabic by Willis Barnstone*

*My Passion Is Like Turbulence at the Head of Waters*

My passion is like turbulence at the head  
of waters  
where boiling rivers sweep away a granite mill.

The sultan of love came to camp in my heart.  
I welcomed him  
and devised ecstatic nights with him,  
but he debated with me and ordered me to satisfy  
his every wild quirk.

But he has an untender heart.  
I beg him.  
He is iron and gives me neither freedom  
nor the joy of union.  
What causes my pain? Is love a joke?

*Translated from the Arabic by Willis Barnstone*

## *Love Songs*

### *I*

When I make love with my lover,  
it is as if I were cleaning grain  
to feed myself: I eat and eat,  
a whole field full,  
yet my heart is not satisfied.

### *II*

I wish I could put pain in the pans of the scale  
To divide it equally between my lover and me.

### *III*

O my dead lover!  
As the children put a candle in a lantern,  
Light comes through the stones of your tomb.

*Translated from the Berber by Willard R. Trask*

## **Didinga or Lango (Uganda)**

### *A Mother to Her First-Born*

Speak to me, child of my heart.  
Speak to me with your eyes, your round, laughing eyes,  
Wet and shining as Lupeyo's bull-calf.

Speak to me, little one,  
Clutching my breast with your hand,  
So strong and firm for all its littleness.  
It will be the hand of a warrior, my son,  
A hand that will gladden your father.  
See how eagerly it fastens on me:  
It thinks already of a spear:  
It quivers as at the throwing of a spear.  
O son, you will have a warrior's name and be a leader of men.  
And your sons, and your sons' sons, will remember you long  
after you have slipped into the darkness.  
But I, I shall always remember your hand clutching me so.  
I shall recall how you lay in my arms,  
And looked at me so, and so,  
And how your tiny hands played with my bosom.  
And when they name you great warrior, then will my eyes be  
wet with remembering.

And how shall we name you, little warrior?  
See, let us play at naming.  
It will not be a name of despisal, for you are my first-born.  
Not as Nawal's son is named will you be named.  
Our gods will be kinder to you than theirs.  
Must we call you "Insolence" or "Worthless One"?  
Shall you be named, like a child of ill fortune, after the dung  
of cattle?  
Our gods need no cheating, my child:  
They wish you no ill.

They have washed your body and clothed it with beauty.  
They have set a fire in your eyes.  
And the little, puckering ridges of your brow—  
Are they not the seal of their finger-prints when they  
    fashioned you?  
They have given you beauty and strength, child of my heart,  
And wisdom is already shining in your eyes,  
And laughter.

So how shall we name you, little one?  
Are you your father's father, or his brother, or yet another?  
Whose spirit is it that is in you, little warrior?  
Whose spear-hand tightens round my breast?  
Who lives in you and quickens to life, like last year's  
    melon seed?  
Are you silent, then?  
But your eyes are thinking, thinking, and glowing like the  
    eyes of a leopard in a thicket.  
Well, let be.  
At the day of naming you will tell us.

O my child, now indeed I am happy.  
Now indeed I am a wife—  
No more a bride, but a Mother-of-one.  
Be splendid and magnificent, child of desire.  
Be proud, as I am proud.  
Be happy, as I am happy.  
Be loved, as now I am loved.  
Child, child, child, love I have had from my man.  
But now, only now, have I the fullness of love.  
Now, only now, am I his wife and the mother of his first-born.  
His soul is safe in your keeping, my child, and it was I, I, I,  
    who have made you.  
Therefore am I loved.  
Therefore am I happy.  
Therefore am I a wife.  
Therefore have I great honor.

You will tend his shrine when he is gone.  
With sacrifice and oblation you will recall his name year by year.  
He will live in your prayers, my child,  
And there will be no more death for him, but everlasting life  
    springing from your loins.  
You are his shield and spear, his hope and redemption from  
    the dead.  
Through you he will be reborn, as the saplings in the Spring.  
And I, I am the mother of his first-born.  
Sleep, child of beauty and courage and fulfillment, sleep.  
I am content.

## Dogon (Former French Sudan)

### *Encouraging a Dancer*

Hail, girl  
The drums are your drums  
May Amma protect your body, your legs  
Agile legs, agile arms, come to the drums  
Pretty head  
All have their eyes on you  
You have good milk  
All have their eyes on you  
You have beautiful sandals  
A calabash in your hand  
A pretty calabash  
All the men have their eyes on you  
All the women have their eyes on you  
All the children have their eyes on you  
All your lovers have their eyes on you  
You have beautiful flesh  
You have beautiful legs  
You have beautiful arms  
All of you is beautiful  
You have done beautiful things, you have done beautiful  
    things, girl, you have done beautiful things  
The voice of the drums is in your ears  
Come, young men  
To the girl, pay over cowries  
It is well  
She is a beautiful girl

*Girls' Secret Love Song*

You shake the waist—we shake.  
Let us shake the waist—we shake.  
You shake the waist—we shake.  
I am going to my lover—we shake.  
Even if it is raining—we shake—  
I am going to my lover—we shake.  
I am going to my lover—we shake.  
He is at Chesumei—we shake.  
Even when night comes—we shake—  
I am going to my lover—we shake.  
Even if he hits me—we shake—  
I am going at night—we shake.  
Even if there is a wild animal—we shake—  
I am going to my lover—we shake.  
A person not knowing a lover—we shake—  
Knows nothing at all—we shake.

*Translated from the Kipsigi by I. G. Peristiany*

*Dialogues*

*I*

*Man:* May I come in, Rasoa-the-well-spoken?

*Woman:* Come in, honored sir,  
I will spread a clean mat for you.

*Man:* I do not want to sit on a clean mat,  
I want a corner of your robe.

*II*

*Man:* May I perish, lady!  
I passed by your husband's house.  
I greeted him, he did not answer;  
I asked him the way, he did not speak.  
What does it mean?

*Woman:* Do not be disturbed.  
I will keep day and night apart.  
The night will be his,  
Daylight will be yours.

## *Girls' Songs*

### *I*

Speak to Him-who-receives-fair-praise,  
The young Prince to the east of Namehana.  
If I call him, I fear people will hear.  
If I get up, I fear they will see me.  
I wait: tell him my regret.  
The skin of him whom I love is perfumed.

### *II*

Tell the clouds to wait,  
For the wind is falling.  
Tell the lake to forget  
For the birds will not come there to sleep.  
It is bad to forget all at once,  
It is good to forget little by little.

### *III*

I am the child without friends  
Who plays alone with the dust,  
I am the chick fallen into the ditch:  
If it calls, its voice is small,  
If it flies, its wings are weak,  
If it waits, it fears the wild-cat.  
Do not make our love a love of stone  
Whose pieces cannot come together;  
Make it a love of lips,  
Even angry, they draw close and meet.

*Love Does Not Know Secrets*

Love knows no secrets,  
when it is hidden it will be discovered.  
Love has no choice;  
when it seizes a man,  
he will confess everything,  
everything that was not done.

Love has no pity,  
even an old man may be put to shame,  
love does not return  
to a Thing it desires.  
When it pursues a man,  
he turns mad.

Love humbles a man,  
his body becomes emaciated;  
when a friend of ours is humiliated  
it is not fair to laugh at him.  
A man does not have the stamina  
to put love aside.

Love never agrees  
to share a man's attention with  
anything.  
If you irritate love,  
you melt away at once.  
Love is a disease,  
a malignant incurable disease.

## *Love*

Love that causes gloom  
that is what has crushed me.  
Although I am in love  
I am badly shaken.  
I do not know what to do  
to remove this love from my heart.

Love is heavy,  
too heavy, it is punishment.  
It burns.  
There is no doctor for it.  
There is no place where one can hide  
Love, I surrender.

Where are the joys  
that have come to me?  
They have all avoided me,  
without reason.  
Today, love makes me suffer  
and punishes me.

My beloved, arrive!  
who has such delightful habits,  
remove all doubt,  
do not change your mind.  
I shall be cured  
at once, when I see you.

*In Praise of Love*

Give me a writing board of Indian wood,  
ink and a precious pen,  
let me praise love for you.

It has entered my heart  
forsooth, oh pupil of my eye,  
you are like cool antimony.

I will care for you, come to me,  
like my eldest child,  
your love is not half as strong as mine.

Let me praise love for you  
let me tell you what I feel,  
so that you can look into my heart.

My heart is full of love,  
if it had a lid,  
I would open it for you.

For you I would open it,  
so that you would know my love,  
it is bursting my inmost being.

It is splitting my inside,  
and yet I feel no pain,  
so much do I love you.

Joy is the fruit of love,  
when my purpose is accomplished,  
I will give you a present for life.

I will not leave you all my life,  
until death may follow,  
may we live in mutual affection.

*Translated from the Swahili by Jan Knappert*

### *A Match in Petrol*

A match, petrol,  
when you have put them away,  
these are two things  
that must not meet,  
that could never go right,  
the place would certainly explode.  
The best thing is to keep them far apart,  
then you will have peace.

There can be no peace at all,  
that is a certain matter,  
fire is sure to break out,  
there is not the slightest doubt about it.  
Then it will be a problem to put it out,  
once the fire has begun to burn.  
I have a fire just like hers,  
so that damage cannot be avoided.

Do not trust them at all,  
not even for one minute,  
they do not agree at all,  
they will explode at once.  
You will expose yourself to danger,  
you will be beyond help.  
And this thing will be certain:  
The fire will not be extinguishable.

*Translated from the Swahili by Jan Knappert*

*To Fatima*

Even when she does not look up,  
She has a lovely neck;  
Even when she is not stretching,  
She has beautiful hips;  
Her hair is full,  
Her neck slender,  
Her eyelashes black,  
Her eyes white,  
Her gums green,  
Her teeth bright,  
Her belly small,  
Her hands soft.

Fatima, the clever one,  
When I do not see her,  
Bitterness slays my eyes;  
When she does not speak,  
Bitterness slays my ears.  
Because of Fatima, the clever one,  
Cold slays me in the evening,  
Heat devours me in the morning.  
I have filled my heart with words;  
So many tears flow out of my eyes  
That I scatter holes upon the sand.

To one who is possessed you refuse a cure,  
To one who is ill you deny recovery.  
Fatima, clever one, say “come,”  
And I shall come in haste;  
Say “don’t come,”  
And I shall come anyway.

*Translated from the Teda by Johannes Lukas*

*Complaint of a Jilted Lover*

Refuse me if you will, girl.  
The grains of maize you eat in your village are human eyes,  
The tumblers from which you drink are human skulls,  
The manioc roots you eat are human tibia,  
The sweet potatoes are human fingers.  
Refuse me, if you will, girl.

*Translated from the Thonga by Henri A. Junod*

*Girl's Song*

O my cousin, my beloved,  
Once I thought I did not love you.  
When they came back saying they had left you dead,  
I went up on the hill where my tomb will be.  
I gathered stones, I buried my heart.  
The odor of you that I smell between my breasts  
Shoots fire into my bones.

*Translated from the Taitok by Willard R. Trask*

*In Praise of Abazza Ag Mekiiia*

He who arrived here last night—I think of him constantly.  
Mokammed and Salek are like him,  
But not like him in charm;  
He is smooth with the smoothness of a reed  
That stands straight in the water, bright green, and sways;  
His white riding-camel kneels, a silver collar around its neck;  
Its master—the moon we see there is the substance of which he is made.

*by Tekadeit oult Ag-Eklan (b. 1860); Tuareg: Kel Ahaggar*

*Love Song of a Girl*

The far-off mountains hide you from me,  
While the nearer ones overhang me.  
Would that I had a heavy sledge  
To crush the mountains near me.  
Would that I had wings like a bird  
To fly over those farther away.

*Translated from the Xhosa by A. C. Jordan*

*Zulu Love Song*

I saw some maidens, those from the Southland  
Who were carrying the pain of lovers  
    in their water-jars.  
They came to the lake, and poured out the pain.  
But back came the Troubler Love, he came  
    and he trembled.

Drive me, O Troubler, up to the Northland,  
To seek a maiden whose heart is single,  
For the heart of these others is double and false!  
For the heart of these, I know, is false!

*Modern and  
Contemporary  
Love Poems*



*A Good Day to You, Si Mohammad*

Good morning, Father  
you are now settled for good  
you are getting used to it, you feel rested  
How are things over there?  
Most likely, you observe everything we do  
our whispers  
our laughter  
our joy  
our sadness  
our immense sadness, our so tiny joy  
Your care for us  
has even increased in your grave  
Do you still pray for us?

Flowers are blooming all around you  
protecting you  
watching over your rest  
Droplets of dew  
wash your flowers every morning  
caress your tombstone  
carefully, tenderly  
as if they were at your service.  
Good morning, Father  
the need of you captivates me  
your last moments of consciousness captivate me  
but my being captivated stifles me  
the need of you captivates me  
How could you leave when I was not present?  
How could you leave without a word of farewell?  
Have you forgotten Abderrahman\*?

Good afternoon, Si Mohammad  
birds land on your tombstone

whisper in your ear  
bring you news of the universe  
the everyday news you liked so much  
tell you about Abderrahman  
bring you his love and respect  
tell you about his sadness  
his deep sadness

Good evening, Si Mohammad  
the moon, shy as a mythical bride  
smiles at you from high  
keeps you company  
gets used to your silence  
spends her nights as your guest  
chases away the darkness that surrounds you  
Happy be you  
who spends your nights in the company of the moon  
your new bride!  
You make tea  
your strong tea  
you fill your glass  
and present it to your guest, the moon  
your new bride  
And your evening starts  
punctuated by confidences  
She tells you  
that Fatima blossoms like a rose  
that Zinaba discovers poetry with a child's laughter  
that Zahra stares confidently at her future  
that Amina is as good as ever  
that Saida hides your picture in her heart  
that Khadija lives in the rhythm of your memory  
that Hassan venerates you in silence  
that your wife shyly tells you that she loves you forever  
and finds out the burdens of life in your absence  
As for Abderrahman

the moon, your new bride, tells you  
that she sees him  
through the bars of his cell  
every night  
They meet  
gaze at each other  
melt in each other

Good night  
Father/brother/friend  
sleep in joy  
in peace  
it is getting late  
and you are not used to staying  
awake so long

sleep  
sleep . . . the moon is watching over you,  
taking care of you  
the moon is watching over you, taking care  
of you . . . sleep.

*Translated from the French by Jacques-Noël Gouat*

\* My late father always called me "Abderrahman" (A. Afarki).

*The Bad Lover*

Leave me, soldier without sense or manners!  
I can see that you are full of contempt,  
Your hand raised, insults on your lips,  
Now that you have had what you want from me.  
And you leave, calling me a dog!  
Sated with my pleasures,  
You'd have me blush for my trade,  
But you, were you ashamed  
When you pushed gently at my door,  
Up like a bull?  
Were you coming to play cards?  
You turned yourself into something humble,  
Agreeing right off to my demands,  
To losing all your pay in advance.  
And the more your eyes undressed me,  
The more your rough desire put you in my power.

When you finally took off my clothes  
I could have had your soul for the asking!  
I could have cursed your mother  
And your father, and their ancestors!  
Toward what paradise were you flying?

But now that you've calmed down,  
You're back on earth,  
Arrogant, rough and coarse as your *djellaba*.

Guest of mine for the moment, my slave,  
Don't you feel my disgust and hate?

One of these days  
The memory of tonight will bring you back to me

Conquered and submissive again.  
You'll leave your pride at the door  
And I'll laugh at your glances and your wishes.  
But you'll have to pay three times the price next time!  
This will be the cost of your insults and pride.

I'll no more notice your clutching  
Than the river notices a drop of rain.

*Translated from the French by Daniel Halpern and Paula Paley*

*What Do You Want?*

What do you want, girl of the village below?  
To marry me, is that what you are thinking?  
It is said that you are hardly unfriendly,  
and I too dream of holding you.  
Here is my only piece of silver.  
The peddler will sell you perfumed soap,  
a comb, a mirror,—what do I know?  
But by my neck, I'll bring you a red scarf  
from Demnat if you want.

*What do I need, son of the high pasture,  
with a piece of silver or silk scarf?*

Then tell me what you want—  
to marry me? What do you think,  
pretty girl of the village below?

*You make me laugh, son of the high pasture.  
I don't care about money or a scarf,  
and even less about marriage.  
I expect from you  
what you expect from me.  
And satisfied, we will leave each other.  
What I want, strong son of the high pasture,  
what I want is the shelter of this bush  
where you will lie on my breasts—which I hold  
out to you—and in a moment  
happiness sweeter than milk,  
while my eyes lose themselves in the sky.*

*Translated from the French by Daniel Halpern and Paula Paley*

*Azouou*

Azouou! Evening Breeze! What a perfect name!  
But why are you so mean?  
I won't leave your door  
Till it opens,  
Or I die waiting.

I see your eyes in the sparking flint.  
Your lips against your teeth  
Draw me to them.  
The peaches of Assermoh have the roundness  
Of your breasts,  
Your skin has the softness  
Of a ring dove's down.  
The small blue tattoo between your eyes,  
The tattoo on your chin,  
The tattoos on your ankles. . . .  
And the hidden tattoos—  
Will I never see those, Azouou?  
Let your hair down over your shoulders.  
I will bury my face there  
Like a partridge under its wing.

Why do you turn me away?  
What do you want?  
What gift will please you?

Your voice cuts through my heart  
With a sharp edge!  
When you walk away  
Your hips move within mine . . .

Azouou! Evening Breeze! What holds you back?  
Lend me your red lips,  
And your moist lips will still be yours.

Lend me your body,  
And your satisfied body will be yours still,

And our two hearts will be together.

*Translated from the French by Daniel Halpern and Paula Paley*

*Azouou's Reply*

Dear Azou, so well named! Azou!  
How could I go on resisting you?  
If you see my eyes when a flint sparks,  
Can't you see that the powder  
Is about to burst into flame?  
That I am undoing my hair?  
Come in! Close the door and push the lock!  
I have ignored your voice long enough.

Why make me sad by talking of gifts  
When I want to make you forget my cruelty?  
I will give you everything you desire—  
My slender tongue and moist lips,  
The vise of my crossed legs. . . .

Does it matter that others  
Have seen my hidden tattoos?  
I sell myself to them.  
I give myself to you.  
And now you alone exist in my heart.

What are you waiting for?  
Undo my belt!  
Beloved Azou! Take my lips!  
Our mouths will open,  
Our bodies will be one  
And our two hearts will be together.

*Translated from the French by Daniel Halpern and Paula Paley*

## *The Brooch*

*Grandmother, grandmother,*  
Since he left I think only of him  
And I see him everywhere.  
He gave me a fine silver brooch  
And when I adjust my *haïk* on my shoulders,  
When I hook its flap over my breasts,  
When I take it off at night to sleep,  
It's not the brooch I see, but him!

My granddaughter, throw away the brooch.  
You will forget him and your suffering will be over.

Grandmother, it's over a month since I threw it away,  
But it cut deeply into my hand.  
I can't take my eyes off the red scar:  
When I wash, when I spin, when I drink—  
And my thoughts are still of him!

My granddaughter, may Allah heal your pain!  
The scar is not on your hand, but in your heart.

*Translated from the French by Daniel Halpern and Paula Paley*

*Love, Love, Love*

I opened the closet  
That I had closed in my youth.  
The love book that I had left  
Was covered with dust  
The dust that covered it,  
I shook it off  
The book said: Who is waking me up?  
Not knowing it was me.  
Even the pages did not recognize me

The book that I had written had forgotten me  
As if what it contained  
Did not evolve from me  
As if another hand had written it  
and I was not present  
Love that we were ashamed of  
All are preaching you today  
They beautify you and call you Tayri  
To me your name brings me pleasure  
How many times have we used it to recall  
O my heart the times of my flame  
That fire has now died  
It has turned into ashes  
Carried by the wind it has left me  
My youth with it has gone  
The traces which remained  
Have been covered by the snows of time

The song that could resuscitate it  
Does not recognize the sites anymore  
Look Tayri what I have become  
How much I have changed

But to me the way I have known you  
That way your face has remained  
Tell me Tayri  
You left me at the crossroads  
Do you remember when we met  
We made the sun shine on our days  
The days that betrayed you  
Have ended betraying me too  
Each has dealt me a blow  
Hitting me and missing you

More, more, more

I still talk about you  
As if time stood still  
Even when I look at your face  
I can hardly believe that it is too late  
Let me believe in my dream  
If you understand me do not blame me  
That is all that I have  
Times for me will not change

Nothing, nothing, nothing

Nothing is softer than you  
And nothing is more bitter  
When I believed in you  
You held your arms open  
You taught me hope  
My youth has remained with you  
It betrayed both of us  
Old age has forbidden your name

Today, today, today

Today, I looked and I saw

Between us a fence of many years  
You have not felt the burdens of time  
They have fallen only upon me  
You know that my friends drink  
They have known you before their old days.  
They will remain heart-broken

It is over, it is over, it is over

It is over I realize it is too late for me  
It is not like the days of my youth  
My words are not beautiful anymore  
I will burn your book  
I will keep your shadow  
Only to be reminded of you  
It is not under ground  
But it is in my heart that I will bury it

Love, love, love

*Translated from the Tamazight by Rabah Seffal*

*It Was Like a Nightmare*

It was like a nightmare  
When I heard that you had moved  
I remained alone with my sorrow  
Unresigned to the fact that you were so far away

Should we chance one day to meet again  
Please do return my glance  
So that among the girls I might still know you  
My eyes shall surely remember yours  
For you left me badly wounded  
Yes, how could I forget you?

And if perchance you should forget me  
Just question your heart and it will answer  
One day I shall pass by your house  
And your heart may remind you of my love  
My heart has been broken  
And you are the reason for its pain

You were the very first girl  
That I ever knew in my life  
Indeed you are the key  
That opens my heart's desire  
But you are also death itself  
Since you thwarted my fate

*Translated from the Tamazight by Rabah Seffal*

*Show Me All*

I want to feel the hotness of your flesh,  
burn in the fire of desire.  
I take no pleasure in dreading the unknown;  
show me all;  
show me the strength of your love  
in your full nakedness.

*One Kiss*

One kiss of parting lovers  
which only lasts a moment  
will claim  
a hundred nights of memories,  
a thousand sighs,  
as the restless soul searches  
in the darkness of solitude,

One swift reunion of lovers  
fulfilled in moments  
will vanish  
a thousand nights of sorrows,  
a thousand tears,  
as two open hearts  
cease to bleed  
locked in perfect union  
this world forgotten,  
as lovers embrace.

*Dubem's Patience*

The mat I shared with you,  
those night visits  
that turned  
my reluctant legs to lead,  
the leaving  
quicker than the going.

That was once  
upon a time;  
you are once  
upon a time.

For it is Dubem  
with the strong arms,  
who gives me yam  
from his large store.

It is Dubem,  
who says to me,  
"Have the children eaten?"

It is Dubem,  
who says to me,  
"Is your head aching?"

It is Dubem,  
who says to me,  
"Woman, rest,  
I shall finish  
the digging for you."

It is Dubem,  
who says to me,  
"I shall carry  
your load for you."

It is Dubem,  
who says to me,  
“Woman,  
the *muli muli*  
of your silky skin  
outshines  
the ripeness  
of the red palm-fruit.”

It is Dubem,  
who says to me,  
“Woman,  
you keep  
the man in me  
impatient for the morning light  
in which I see  
your smiling face.”

It is Dubem,  
who says to me,  
“How I envy  
that wet wrapper  
that clings  
so tightly,  
so intimately.”

Did our people not say  
“It is the patient penis  
that eats the bearded meat”?  
eeyyeh!  
Yes,  
it is this patient  
Dubem  
who will eat  
this bearded meat!

### *A Passing Feeling*

Man with misty eyes,  
Oh look!  
See how the colorful  
prairie chicken taps,  
vibrates,  
in orgasmic rhythms in dance;  
the deep oo—oo—oo sound,  
like the blowing  
of the big cow-horn,  
tells its satisfaction  
as it dances  
for the coming again  
of the season of spring.

See how I myself,  
in lightness of mood,  
leap up into this  
bewitching sun-glory  
in movements  
of loosened limbs,  
as I lean forward  
my vibrating body  
in dance challenges,  
right before your moody eyes,  
full of worried looks.

Only for this fleeting moment,  
join in my own dance,  
be a man of the season for now;  
be servant  
to this compulsive pulsing  
of our joyous hearts!

My dance  
asks more  
than a nodding head.  
Yet, it is not forever,  
nor is it for worse;

Only a passing feeling,  
only a single pleasure,  
only this single treasure  
of an ecstatic being  
of here and now!

Will she deny us  
a single pleasure,  
the stiff-necked woman,  
chained in a golden ring  
around her fine finger  
in selfish single monopolies!

## *Gypsy Woman*

The short, fat gypsy woman  
came rolling to my door one morning,  
with sweet-coated tongue and daisies,  
eyes shining,  
teeth flashing,  
she called me a star!  
She said it was my special day.

The gypsy woman put wild dreams in me;  
a gentle madness of wine  
in my head, my mind, my body,  
the totality of me,  
steady, sure,  
head held high,  
skirt, black and flowing,  
earrings, huge and round,  
in ringing echoes of string music,  
I stepped onto the pure pavement,  
now a terrace of scented gardens,  
and crossed the empty street.

Suddenly, there he was!  
The world stood still.  
Clouds, blue-green  
like a rainbowed parasol  
came down,  
enclosed us, and shut out the world.  
Slowly in a daze,  
drawing closer  
in aromatic dozes of gypsy spell,  
we met.

Did I ever see you, my beloved?  
I was the slave of a gypsy woman;  
I served in bondage for years,

shed so many many tears,  
living and wading in dreams,  
none heard the silent screams.

You, my beloved, dug in the knife,  
till the stars in pain left our heaven;  
now a dark forest,  
full of stinging rays  
from your glittering knife.

One by one, my love,  
you killed our daisies,  
turning white the gypsy lie.

Alas, today, beloved,  
with one last cry,  
one last tear-drop,  
the blinding clouds recede  
and I say, enough!  
Surely now,  
I am free of the gypsy woman!

*The New Warmth*

The frosted season of our love  
does not end  
and the benumbed fingers of our clasped  
souls congeal.  
We burst into tears of anguish and joy.  
Did they say that God shall wipe all tears  
from every eye?  
I bring my offerings of new corn before your  
altar.  
Unclasp our hands so I can place them on the  
firewood.  
In the sameness of the feast we discover the  
focal point.  
In the bamboo grove of yesterday's desires  
And the other day's ambitions  
We seek a life in the house of the fire-god  
So the benumbed fingers of our souls can  
unclasp  
And the new fire warm us all.

### *Lover's Song*

There was a time under a bridge  
in a foreign country, if I recall,  
she came shy weepy.

I told her of love  
    and of love's sadness  
    solitude and an empty bed.

She answered with silence  
dropped a necklace into the grass  
turned her head to watch a star.  
Then she embraced me kindly  
and left a paint in the grass.

### *Lovers' Song*

Call her, call her for me, that girl  
That girl with the neck like a desert tree  
Call her that she and I will lie in one bed.  
When you went away  
Isn't it seven years?  
Shall I fold mine and say I am cheap  
Returned unsold from the market  
If they marry a woman don't they sleep with her?  
Isn't it seven years now since you went away?

**Gabeba Baderoon (South Africa)**

*Beginning*

I turn a corner and see your face.  
Our lives spool out from that glance.

I give up everything for this.  
I remember everything I've left behind.

You pack your books on the shelves next to mine.  
On an envelope addressed to you I write a list of groceries.

You speak to me of your former loves.  
You tell me I am your first love.

Before we start the middle of our lives together,  
before we contemplate leaving each other,  
ceding the subtle map of the bed,

let us linger on a beginning.

## *Finding You*

In your absence I count:  
the artist's pencils you grabbed for notes  
and your sudden, angled smile  
are not here.

My gifts are in one pile, and I do not know  
the names on the cards you have received.  
My drawings intrigue you, a face  
catches your eye.

As I pace this line, I notice  
the slow leaking of meanings.  
On an envelope addressed to you I  
have scribbled a list of groceries.  
From the sly beauty of your books  
I drink words  
like an indiscreet guest;  
your thoughts are bookmarks.

Love is shuffling us like cards.

*Where Nothing Was*

When we met and your face first  
clarified itself  
from the world,

I tried to find the words  
to show where, in my chest,  
two senses fired

at once—  
touch and sound.  
A word for grip and hum together.

A word for the thrum when  
the metal chain of an anchor whips  
hard and holds.

Or the clout of hands  
as trapeze artists grasp each other,  
the brief, final clasp

of coming to rest  
where you knew  
nothing was

a moment before.

*The Dream in the Next Body*

From the end of the bed, I pull  
the sheets back into place.

An old man paints a large sun striped  
by clouds of seven blues.

Across the yellow center each  
blue is precisely itself and yet,  
at the point it meets another,  
the eye cannot detect a change.  
The air shifts, he says,  
and the colors.

When you touched me in a dream,  
your skin an hour ago did not end  
where it joined mine. My body continued  
the movement of yours. Something flowed  
between us like birds in a flock.

In a solitude larger than our two bodies  
the hardening light parted us again

but under the covering the impress  
of our bodies is a single, warm hollow.

*The Eyes or the Heart?*

1

I bring accusations      let them reach every place  
what has happened to me      let me explain it all  
I, your friend, am grieved      I am not satisfied even when I eat  
from thinking of the misfortune      that has happened to me.

2

I blamed myself      I put the fault on my heart  
for making me infatuated      while I loved the beloved  
it came about that I had no time      even to want to sleep  
because of the many anxieties      and the difficulty I found.

3

So I took my heart to judge it      “Why give me this low  
state of mind?”  
and it answered, “Understand      I, your heart, am not at fault  
you had better blame      what saw the beloved  
they were the first to see      and to give me the desire.”

4

And when I went back to my eyes      to show them their fault  
they also defended themselves      “It is the heart that brings  
unhappiness  
our job is just to look      we don’t eat a thing  
the heart loves the beloved      this is slander for us eyes.”

5

And my heart answered me      “Well, then, say, what next!  
this is useless, don’t trouble yourself      looking for the one at fault  
it is the eyes, it is because of them      that I like the place  
because they are the ones who saw      and so I desired.”

6

On going back to my eyes they would not accept responsibility  
 and they swore an oath to God showing that they were not at fault  
 and when I went back to my heart it said, "Never, never in your  
 life  
 blame the one who saw for it was then I began to desire."

7

My friends, these things astonish me these two things together  
 you will bring judgment show me the one at fault  
 that I may know what to do which one made me unhappy  
 either my eyes by seeing or should I blame my heart?

8

The end, I finish it where it has stopped, O messenger  
 when He comes who is the Judge to show me the one at fault  
 let him not make unlawful judgment let him judge rightly  
 so that I may know the one with troubles either the eyes or  
 the heart.

*Translated from the Swahili by Lyndon Harries*

## *The Love of Which I Speak*

The love of which I speak,  
so that we may all enjoy it one day,  
is praising one another's hearts,  
then we shall be one.

That is the best love  
for wise people;  
they will receive every treasure,  
when their intentions are pure.

The profit of loving one another  
has no equal;  
nor have I seen anything like it  
in this world.

When mortals love one another  
they will live in mutual understanding forever;  
and many things will succeed,  
with purity of intention.

Those who possess true love  
in their hearts  
will protect one another against suffering,  
and will show each other the way.

Love, that is the origin  
of people being together,  
and if that were not so,  
evil would have no end.

Love is a necessity,  
that is the beginning of unity;  
it brings people together in society  
so they become one.

Love, even in religion,  
God the Giver has commanded us  
that we must love one another,  
that we must not treat each other badly.

Love is a wall  
which will stop war;  
they will not persist in discord  
who love consciously.

Love is peace  
and mercy on earth;  
that is a priceless thing,  
it means we are all together.

## *A Certain Person*

### **1**

In the beginning I begin by asking forgiveness  
I do not want you to blame me with your tongue  
love is a poison the loved one does not see  
though she be shown visibly.

### **2**

The wound which I have inside me  
pierces my heart and cuts me to the heart  
because of my love for a certain person  
where I go I have no peace.

### **3**

I find difficulty because of the longing which is in my heart  
it increases a thousandfold all day long I speak of her  
on the path I am like a blind man now I see, now I do not  
for thinking of a certain person.

### **4**

I swear by God  
it is by God's Name that I swear to Him  
my heart is troubled because of love  
show me the way that I may go forward.

*Translated from the Swahili by Lyndon Harries*

## *My Beloved*

### **1**

I bring you greetings    my beloved, respond  
read well and understand    everything I have written  
in my disconsolate state    because love has hold of me  
and do not blame me    my heart wants you.

### **2**

It is not I who want disgrace    I want what is right  
it is my heart which prompts me    to proclaim these things  
towards you it suffers pain    it does not act normally  
please satisfy me    give my heart what it wants.

### **3**

It hurts me so much    concerning you my heart gives anguish  
so that it has no choice    it spins round like a top  
whether night or day    if you are mentioned it is startled  
please hide me    lest I be destroyed.

### **4**

I give you my most inmost thoughts    believe in the Lord God  
when I see you, my love    my heart is split apart  
and my eyes see nothing    my legs shake  
and then when I am asleep    if I dream of you I start up.

### **5**

And what drew me    to your dear self, just listen  
is your eyes and your eyebrows    especially when you laugh  
and then your diction as well    and the shape you were made  
when I look at you I never stop    I get confused for sure.

### **6**

There are many things that trouble me    nor shall I write them all  
but the thing that eats me up    and makes my blood dry up  
is what I am telling you    so don't say it is a joke  
this is what eats my heart out    and makes me lose my senses.

The writer has written      listen to my desire, listen  
Don't be angry with me      and grow resentful  
You can answer me      "I do not want" or "I want"  
so don't find it difficult      according to your liking, speak.

*Translated from the Swahili by Lyndon Harries*

**Syl Cheney-Coker (Sierra Leone)**

*To My Wife Dying of Cancer (1)*

For Dalisay

To see you lying on the couch propped up with pillows,  
drinking those sour juices of wheat grass , apricot kernels,  
and silkworm milk, blended to halt the hand  
of this odious sentence, was not the worst knife of all,  
but to remember the summers when you did not need to knit  
colourful Afghans to bring out the sunflowers in your eyes.

Nothing prepares us for the un-symmetry of God: this cruel hand,  
when, even after the Pelvic Exoneration, you were uncomplaining,  
deprived of much that is woman from the chemo that sapped you  
like a reluctant banana transplanted from the tropics to Antarctic.

You sat up to watch the TV, constant companion in your agony,  
but never gave up the habit of reading:  
a raccoon digging for knowledge in a forest;

Dreaming of home, we used to walk by the lake in Guymon,  
feeding the squirrels, mocking the squawking geese,  
and listening to Chris, the old man next to our apartment,  
complained about his legs, but at least he was able to drive.

Now, it is you that lie waiting for a new God all day long,  
as I sit holding your hand , flying in from Las Vegas,  
even though the tarantulas of security and agonies  
of wait at the airports are scripts undeserving of memory.

After twenty four years of a love begun in Manila,  
and tested in the desert of Maiduguri, then Freetown,  
your wish was to live long enough to return  
to the river flowing in front of the house in Juba:  
my last book of the trilogy that you insisted I must edit.

In the expectation of miracle, Malaika and Davey  
pray for a word from God, and I marvel at the strength  
that keeps you going without bitterness, this side of tragedy.

*To My Wife Dying of Cancer (2)*

Last month, I moved you into the hospice,  
after those chemo journeys to hospitals  
and clinics smelling of painful prognosis, sharp as raw pepper.  
Restrained as statuettes, the doctors said their goodbye.

Seeing you reduced to dependency, this pain  
that does not respond to cure, your hallucinations  
come in English and Tagalog like a tormented juxtaposition.  
Like a conductor's slow movements, you move your arms  
to an orchestra of mute players, ready with bone harps and limpid  
drums.

And I go on thinking that life is not a river's rhythm,  
not a lark's sweet violin ascending to the sky;  
for even when you couldn't see the sun, you had a smile  
to make the weeping willows bloom outside of your window.

The feel of autumn turns the leaves yellow.  
Rain is falling: sweet memory of my tropical youth,  
now that my life is so near to being tragic.  
But, dear God, that woman lying inside,  
who is all bones: a reduced narrative of skeletons;  
who will not see the leaves changing their colours.

Bring her quickly to your sunny world,  
for the song that would keep her alive and smiling  
died a long time ago in the flute of your lips that are silent.

## *Homecoming*

I come home with the ashes of she who was my wife,  
my Polaroid eyes falling on the empty rooms  
where she will no longer walk. Fragile as flower,  
my mother comes from her own grave to console me.  
In the study, I do not even find a pen; the desk on which  
I write this poem eaten away by termites.

No dogs play in the yard, I think of their old brawls—  
the bullet-riddled one, especially, that I buried  
near the spot where my wife planted the avocado:  
its crude stump now yawning a dwarf in my heart!

Having buried so many of them,  
the dead deserve a quiet place in my garden,  
but I speak angrily of one disagreeable man,  
who destroyed the avocado; all the other trees  
in my yard hacked—his ghost a ghoulish presence  
in his unfinished house; the nights of his noisy relatives  
his legacy of a wanton dream to torment me,  
as I go to sleep, thinking of planting a new tree  
for a soul that was always smiling.

*Poem for a Lost Lover*

to Merle Alexander

Eyes of heavenly essence, O breasts of the purity of breasts  
Russian sapphire of the blue of eyes  
O wine that mellows like the plenitude of Bach  
Sargassian sea that is the calm of your heart  
the patience of you loving my fragile soul  
the courage of you molding my moody words  
I love you woman gentle in my memory!

O woman of the thirst of Siddhartha's love  
you that I lost in the opium of my youth  
have you fallen among the rocks off the New England coast  
or now in premature grey nurse a stubborn tear  
at the window watching winter's snow-coated leaves  
here the tropical blossom of an African November  
breathes gently on the tree of my heart  
Oh that you could have known it woman of the sexual waters  
heart of the spirit born of that love  
dressing continents with garlands for whom I say  
night strike my heart with the purest verse!

*Chipo::Gift*

for Helen

Another gift from home searches nine months  
for the underground route I took out,  
years wriggling out of the man-made crocodile  
on Mponda's copper-beach shore,  
your firm arms splitting the beast's jaw. You,

mysterious Alice we misnamed Gift,  
swam through my blood into your mother's blood,  
till, beached on the sweet island, you basked awhile;  
Then, daughter with divine and noble feather,

You carried your baskets brimming light,  
crossed wild oceans, past lavish mansions,  
and chose our humble nest to grow your wings.

## *Hands That Give*

for Pat

Are open doors; they bear the cross of the rose;  
Are petals of love to the famished mouth.  
Wheat was made for your arms thick to the  
elbow in dough—

In your hands everything turns to prayer:  
Love ripples through it; life pulses through it.  
*Hosannas* rise highest from your fingers  
to my ravenous mouth.

(Mothering, you have mothered me  
through the times that thrust their lean  
bodies into my helpless arms.)

The dough and our children awaken  
from our breath from our heartbeats;  
Like my silent aunt you roll your breath  
in the sweet bread dough—

Out of poverty you knead a new loaf  
to feed the gods in us.

A cake, a loaf of surprises and bread rolls  
roll out from the flour, love and tears;  
butter milk, drops of sobs and sweat.  
Into all this you dissolve your self.  
From these hands I replenish my self.

Once, when I fell from the twentieth century,  
Your hands polished my soul till it glittered.  
Besides my ribs, two soft hands lassoed  
to clean attentive ears, like fluffy rabbits,  
raked my back, peeled the pain from my mind,  
and shortened the lean legs of exile.

Out of the oppressive fumes of the kitchen,  
These hands release a feast from your magic horn  
Onto the altar of our secret shrine.  
In the heart of each cake you conceal a crystal star.

## *The Kiss*

after Rodin, after Bloom

This marble kiss will never erode, never fade,  
From the stone lips sealed with sweetness.  
The rock's fine fingers are wings on her marble skin;  
The birds of his palms are flying over her,  
Softly sifting love onto her bared thigh.  
His body, kissing hers, suddenly surges awake:  
Music burns through his veins, every cell sings.  
In his arms flow a million gallons of blood  
That flowed through the arms of generations.

Her lips, having carefully read his body,  
Rest on his own, read the Braille of his lips,  
Her palm fronds fan the fire.  
As they dance up the ancient fig tree,  
His fingers fanning the flame he kindled in her loins,  
Oils welling from her secret river anoint him,  
Coating him as he stirs her soul in the flesh bowl  
Where their lives blend and thicken forever—

At both ends where they are neatly joined  
He is pouring his turbulent life into her—  
Their tongues stirring storms in their mouths.

As she laves him with her own,  
His needle dances in the grooves of her song,  
Their tongues licking songs inside their mouths:  
The double kiss doubles their joy.

## *Wife/Life*

Pat

My friend, my sister, my wife,  
rhyme weaves you into my life.  
Now the two letters shuttle me  
between you and life, wife  
of my youth and now my midlife,  
between nature and nurture, what was  
Eve and Adam, the garden you carry  
and a brook that, sleeping, awakes to my thirst.

Between us we reseal our dreams with kisses,  
your lips on my heart  
beat, on my pulsing sweet root,  
your hands kneading the sweet dough  
into a hard-baked breadstick  
that enrages your hunger.

I cannot drop you without breaking my life.

For my hunger you offer brown loaves  
and a chalice of consecrated honey for my thirsty  
root through which my sacred spring  
surges towards your buried honey  
that rages like a sacred volcano  
your fiery thighs, twin songs that braid my back  
your arms, vines that bind me to this house  
whose shoulders prop up my pain-drenched body.

In you, my mother, your mother  
and the mother of my children,  
is my wife and my life:

Wife, you *are* my life.

## *A Song in Spring*

for Masauko

My son dances in the circle  
of his own light:  
See his feet blossom  
as he dances to a distant song.

My son dances, steps over the sun:  
He has caught the sun in his palm!  
He rubs the sun with his fingers  
His fingers bloom, his fingers are

The sun that he caught, are the flower  
That he waves as he dances in the circle

Of his own light  
Of his own sun.

*O Tulip, Tulip I Have Chosen*

**I**

O tulip, tulip I have chosen from among all the flowers of our  
great races of men!  
I sing your slim black body, I tell of your slender girl's body,  
of your suddenly flashing eyes  
I cry aloud the blue palm tree of your lashes  
The broadswords of your plaited tresses, commas of lightning  
stabbing the sky.  
I shout your charms, ah! your lips that are fleshy dates!

**II**

Young woman, full bosomed, loins more fertile than the banks  
of the Nile  
I will wait for you when in my vast orchards the mangoes like  
censers breathe out their smells;  
And the wind sways the great fans and most delicate gifts.  
Then, on an evening of *bairam*, very early you will come,  
O beauty of blackness, under your white veil.  
I will welcome you among wedding songs and rhapsodies of  
blood.  
I will be clothed all in dream, but no mirror in my hut  
Only the green of your eyes where I may drown my longing.  
I will gird me with the strength of the young men to carry you  
off more swiftly leaving the impatient matrons without.  
Woi! You will be my glory, I your pride, O Beauty of blackness!

**III**

Sope, when you are gay, when you are gay, Sope  
Your smile caresses my eyes.

Then I would become your joy, to unfold your tulip face.  
Yes, die upon your lips, quench myself in your voice,  
Yes, drown in your dark eyes.

When my dark lady walks, the desire takes me to be under her  
feet.

That I might kiss her feet, that they might trample my heart,  
ah! Lord!

When my dark lady adorns herself, she is Sogolon, the Malinke  
Princess.

Would I were boubou, jewels, golden slippers.

Between my fingers, from thread and from gold and from leather  
Let me weave her body in finest diamonds, in my glittering  
poems.

José Craveirinha (Mozambique)

*Just*

Love,  
Not so much  
Please

Now and again  
take me in your arms  
and wrap me in the brown and yellow caress of your desire

Now and again  
so that I can forget  
until morning when they come to get us  
and we don't know if we'll be back  
and if we're man or thing  
and if we can know the nature of true laughter  
and if this be true or false  
Call the Children  
and the house  
and the woman with the frightened eyes  
without the waking appearance of remorse

Love,  
not so much  
please

Just now and again

take me in your crossed arms  
and wrap me in the brown and yellow caress of your love  
and in the peaceful certainty of your affection

Now and again

Just now and again  
take me in your arms  
my love

*Translated from the Portuguese by Arthur Brakel*

*Rama Kam*

song for a black woman

I like your wild beast look  
And your mouth that tastes of mango

Rama Kam

Your body is black spice  
That makes desire sing

Rama Kam

When you pass  
The loveliest girl envies  
The warm rhythm of your hips

Rama Kam

When you dance  
The tomtom Rama Kam  
The tomtom stretched like a victorious sex  
Gasps under the drummer's leaping fingers  
And when you love  
When you love Rama Kam  
A tornado quivers  
In the lightning night of your flesh  
And leaves me full of the breath of you

O Rama Kam!

*Close to You*

Close to you I have regained my name  
My name long hidden beneath the salt of distances  
I have regained eyes no longer veiled by fevers  
And your laughter like a flame making holes in the dark  
Has given Africa back to me beyond the snows of yesterday  
Ten years my love  
And mornings of illusion and wreckage of ideas  
And sleep peopled with alcohol  
Ten years and the breath of the world has poured its  
    pain upon me  
Pain that loads the present with the flavor of tomorrows  
And makes of love an immeasurable river  
Close to you I have regained the memory of my blood  
And necklaces of laughter around the days  
Days that sparkle with joys renewed.

*To My Mother*

When memories rise around me  
Memories of anxious halts on the edge of the abyss  
Of icy seas where harvests drown  
When days of drifting live in me again  
Days in rags with a narcotic flavor  
When behind closed shutters  
The word turns aristocrat to embrace the void  
Then mother I think of you  
Your beautiful eyelids scorched by the years  
Your smile on my hospital nights  
Your smile that spoke old vanquished miseries  
O mother mine and mother of all  
Of the negro who was blinded and sees the flowers  
again  
Listen listen to the voice  
This is the cry shot through with violence  
This is the song whose only guide is love.

**Isobel Dixon (South Africa)**

*Love Is a Shadow*

she-camel bucks the wind,  
curls back her supple lip  
at her own scent

she has not stored enough  
for drought like this  
is thirsty, thirsty

going down to Egypt  
with her clumsy, rolling gait  
snorting, crying after shadows

in the changeless desert  
after sandy crescent moons  
where horses' hooves

have galloped, gone away

### *Aftertaste*

The vineyard's moonlit coolness  
slipped around us, soft chiffon,  
as I held out to you sweet hanepoot  
knowing deeply how your lips  
would brush upon my fingers as you bit  
the firm flesh from the stalk.

Now so cultured, as you stand and talk  
you sip unconsciously  
your hand curled carelessly about the stem—  
a rather special year our hostess said—  
its subtle bite upon my tongue  
too chill and rather dry.

### *You, Me and the Orang-utan*

Forgive me, it was not my plan  
to fall in love like this. You are the best of men,  
but he is something else. A king  
among the puny; gentle, nurturing.

Walking without you through the zoo, I felt his gaze,  
love at first sight, yes, but through the bars, alas.  
Believe me, though, it's not a question of his size—  
what did it for me were his supple lips, those melancholy eyes,

that noble, furrowed brow. His heart, so filled with care  
for every species. And his own, so threatened, rare—  
how could I not respond, there are so few like him these days?  
Don't try to ape him or dissuade me, darling, please.

For now I think of little else, although  
it's hopeless and it can't go on, I know—  
I lie here, burning, on our bed, and think of Borneo.

### *Cusp of Venus*

We lay together, hot, but innocent,  
the lawn our green-sprung bed  
inside the warm tent of the darkness,  
blanketed by stars.

Then, touching, touching, whispering  
for hours, sometimes you shielded me  
from bats or comets, or the night breeze  
creeping up on us.

As heat and gravity pressed you to me,  
I knew that I would always be here—  
in your orbit, moist, aglow—  
while stars spilled past

down to the far side of the world,  
to other nights and other budding lovers  
learning how to topple heaven and earth.

## *Intimacy*

She tried not to wake him, weeping  
with his arm still cast across her,  
a man in his deep and sudden sleep.

Such dammings up. Was it the heave,  
despite herself, of her breast,  
or the hot salt sliding to his skin

that made him reach out blindly  
for her face: wiping each cheek  
with large and tender hands,

though she knew from his breathing  
and the morning's bright, clean slate,  
that he was only dreaming, half-awake.

## *Giving Blood*

You did it once. They strapped  
the velcroed pad around your arm  
and your veins grew,  
blue and luminous and huge.  
Your heart pumped fiercely,  
with enormous thuds  
and the blood gushed,  
thick red splattering the bag.  
Watching the flood and smash of it  
you felt the needle jumping  
wildly in your vein  
and even after hot, sweet tea,  
a biscuit, rest, the room whirled,  
darkened when you stood.

Crude biology alone attests  
to your impatient energy:  
I listen to the anecdote and know  
you are too fast, too furious for me.  
I'm pale and slow; my head spins easily.  
They've sent me home before,  
my heart too cautious, pressure low,  
no good. So I'm glad that something—  
needle breaching skin—can frighten you,  
but still feel a stab, my weakness,  
grudging awe. And if I'm honest, more:

a fierce, hot flush suffuses me.  
I am drawn, repulsed, humiliated, drenched.

*Fantasy under the Moon*

(Blues for a muted trumpet)

I climbed towards you on a ray of moonlight  
that filtered through a hole in my straw-thatched house  
When I had reached the smiling arch of your mouth among the  
stars  
you came to me  
open under the sea of your body the heaving wave under my body  
my heart beating to the rhythm of yours moving to the rhythm of  
your tribe the people of the mountain;  
your serpent form writhing beneath mine  
I sucked your cobra's poison from your broken lips  
and my fever mounted like a sickness.

I visited last night our banana grove of the first time.  
When I reached those great somber aisles  
under which we pressed each other behind your mother's back  
under the teasing trumpet of thirsty mosquitoes  
the circle of my arms about your shadow your phantom  
all at once hung emptier than the rope of a wine-tapper  
embracing the palm tree.

I don't know why that large cloud crossing the moon  
suddenly made the tide of your body fall.  
Like oiled wrestlers at a festival  
who feel their adversary slide between their arms  
powerless I felt you slip from mine  
under the moon's light white as this wine as your teeth which made  
you so gay  
as you fluttered wildly in the circle of the dance  
while your mother warned you not to come near me.

I looked up at the sky from the depths of my hut;  
the moon was only a smile, your white smile congealed.

*Love in the Daytime*

My lover  
Shines like the sun.  
I may be burned  
Black as a frying pan,  
Sweating buckets  
And keeling over  
With vertigo,  
But why worry?

My lover  
Shines like the sun.  
She pours over my body  
And breathes into my soul.  
It feels so good  
When she lights  
My love on fire  
Like dry wood.

*Translated from Tigrinya by Charles Cantalupo with Ghirmai Negash*

*"I Love You" II*

Young and afraid  
I should have said  
"I love you."

I hear her reply:  
"You really want me? Ssshh.  
Send your father to mine."

Shy, greener than green,  
I couldn't say it.  
"I love you."

*Translated from Tigrinya by Charles Cantalupo with Ghirmai Negash*

*Ferenji and Habesha*

Hey sugar.  
Hey shkor.  
Come 'ere honey.  
I love you, mAr.  
Oooh, my sweetest.  
You're the best.  
I'm crispy little bread.  
I'm hard thick crust.  
Have some honey wine.  
Taste this dark sorghum beer.  
Do we need a car?  
Nah, a mule suits us fine.  
Let's build a home.  
We'll make it like our poem.  
Near the city for fun.  
But far enough away to relax in.  
Hey Habbash. What you want Ferenji?  
Kiss me. Not in public, sweet ass.

*Translated from Tigrinya by Charles Cantalupo with Ghirmai Negash*

*Whose Daughter?*

If I can't have her  
Every morning every day  
My head aches.

I take her at breakfast  
And after breakfast.  
I want her at lunch  
And after lunch.  
I need her at dinner  
And after dinner.

She slides through my lips  
And licks my tongue.  
She comes in my mouth  
And I'm a man  
Down to my core.

Burning incense,  
I take her leisurely  
On my sheepskin at home.  
If I need her really bad,  
Any bar we're in will do,  
And I take her standing up.

Whose daughter would do this,  
Kiss after kiss after kiss  
All day and all night long?  
Is such behavior wrong?  
Look in your pot on the fire.

I'll tell you her name—coffee.

*Translated from Tigrinya by Charles Cantalupo with Ghirmai Negash*

*Talking about Love*

Talking about love  
Depends . . .  
Is it hot or cold?

Talking about love  
Doesn't end.  
Is it sour or sweet?

Talking about love,  
Don't pretend.  
The human heart

Gave birth to love  
And an identical twin—  
Hate—

Stalking us to this day.  
Talking about love  
We deal with both.

*Translated from Tigrinya by Charles Cantalupo with Ghirmai Negash*

*Silas*

Silence so deep  
It can be heard,  
And a full moon—  
A peaceful night,

Until a bird  
Starts whispering,  
*Chirp, chirp, chirp.*  
He wants his mate

And over there  
Right away  
Another bird  
Loud and clear

Replies, *I'm here*  
*For you, my hero.*

Silas, listen.  
Please don't be dense.

What the bird says  
Is *yes* to love.  
Silas, say *yes*.  
Love's calling you.

Enough silence.  
Answer *yes*.  
If you give, you get,  
And then we rock.

Silas, listen.  
Please don't be dense.

*Translated from Tigrinya by Charles Cantalupo with Ghirmai Negash*

*Let's Divorce and Get Married Again*

I worried about you  
Having your first child,  
But rising like the star  
The wise men saw  
You overcome my fear  
And I bowed to your light.

It felt like an earthquake  
As thunder filled the sky  
And the seas seemed to part.  
My world went wild,  
Making my poetry soar  
In the ululation  
Of your opening life's door.

Not long after the birth  
And christening, did someone make  
You change, threatening  
And pushing me away?  
Could anyone give you more  
Of his heart than me,  
And giving it all for your sake?

So now what can I say?  
If I whispered  
In your ear, "Let's divorce  
And get married again,"  
Would you feel better,  
Like you did back then?

*Translated from Tigrinya by Charles Cantalupo with Ghirmai Negash*

*Sounding Drum*

There is a universe buried inside of me.  
A hibernating hide  
waits  
anxiously  
to be sounded.  
Sounded by the vibration that is you.

The inside of me is a sounding drum.  
A pulsating drum,  
suspended,  
pulsing,  
toned,  
by the tenderness that is you.

I am a universe.  
A drum sounded into life by the rhythm  
that is you.  
Your heart drums me into sound.  
Your heart beats my drum,  
my song.

At last!  
The drum that is me  
vibrates with rhythm  
that is you.

## *You Rock My World*

You rock my world,  
man of primeval passions.  
Your rousing touch ignites  
every atom in my care-ridden body.

Miracle maker  
injecting life blood into me,  
I cherish your invitations  
to the threshing floor of healing.

For always I emerge, purged of all tension,  
resonant in rhythms that are vibrantly radiant.  
Your manhood draws out my womanhood.  
Your touch lifts me high above life's drudgery.

My maker must have given you the key  
to my sanctuary.  
For you have unlocked the door  
to the secret of my life.

Miracle maker  
Your touch unleashes  
that primal joy of knowing  
how well loved I am.

Sore Ka Pra: *Whoopie, Akan Time*

Before alarm clocks,  
Akans had *Sore ka pra*.  
*Sore ka pra* of tender genesis.  
Rousing feather strokes, energizing drowsy wives.  
Husbands passionately beget happy homemaking.

*Sore ka pra!*  
“Wake up and go sweep” erupts into  
husband passions pestling tender  
offerings into enraptured mortars.  
Wives bask sensuously in  
the tender embrace of husbands.  
The rhythm of pestles encircled  
by the syncopation of mortars.

*Sore ka pra!*  
Cherished secret of women breezing through  
their day’s chores.  
Fully-sated, wives spill marital contentment,  
creating anew a slumbering world  
in intricately executed broomstrokes.  
Signatures!  
Signifiers  
of marital bliss.

## *Happy Father's Day*

June 20, 1992

I wake up with you on my mind.  
Man of my life,  
begetter of my children.  
I wake breathing,  
tasting,  
feeling,  
smelling,  
seeing you.  
Not in my mind's eye, but in my being.  
Sewn as you are inside the fabric of my being.

So I console myself I can stand  
this physical separation imposed  
by the necessity of our lives  
and all the lives that tie into ours.  
I leave you with all I love  
and set out, the proverbial heroine.  
I go to slay the dragon that dogs our lives.

I come back wiser than I left maybe,  
but certainly bearing fruit—the stock  
of that harvest we sowed together  
at the beginning of our becoming.  
On this father's day away from you,  
I hail you father-mother-companion.  
Progenitor of me and ours,  
I cannot find enough ways to serenade you.  
*Oyeadze!*  
*Me da wo fom.*

*Messenger, I Send You*

Messenger, I send you, if you are intelligent,  
go quickly and ask, that I may know,  
does love hurt, or is that lies and slander?

Noble gentlemen, civilized and cultured,  
I want information, I seek your reply,  
is love a quality, or is it a disgrace?

Furthermore, ask them, the readers of law,  
to tell you the truth, not to deceive you,  
is love permitted, or is it prohibited?

Furthermore, explain these words to the physicians;  
remember well what I am telling you,  
is love a disease, or is it a state of health?

Also to the medicine men do not omit to go,  
confess your ignorance, so that you may learn,  
is love a being tied, or is it to act?

And those with understanding, all the worldly people,  
even madmen, argue my point with them,  
is loving sweet, or is it bitterness?

And those without intelligence, with blind hearts,  
ask them this without circumlocution,  
is love truth, or is it a lie?

Youngsters, children, even imbeciles,  
and interpreters of dreams, repeat (the question) to  
    them all,  
is love hot, or is it cold?

Even the animals, go to them and try them,  
and if one is not sure, ask his fellow,  
is love inside, or is it outside?

Even the inanimate beings, even those that cannot hear,  
and sky and earth, ask them all,  
is love good fortune, or is it being unlucky, unhappy?

Accept knowledge, so that you may know what to say,  
go and ask death, the great mourner,  
is loving dying, or is it salvation?

Get up, hurry, quickly, let them give you the answer,  
that I may finish worrying,  
is love black, or is it white?

*Love Is Not Sweet*

The scholars of Syria and all those from Hejaz  
have already given their opinion in clear words;  
love is not sweet in these times.

Wiles and cunning tricks are now very frequent,  
and good words are no longer heard;  
love between two people is lacking.

When you behave honestly towards her, my friend and  
comrade,  
she will reply with anger and abuse;  
unrequited love, what pleasure is  
there in it?

Even if you ran all the way, you would not be able to  
keep up with it,  
and when you give her this person, she does not even  
say thank you;  
the one who follows his heart will regret it afterwards.

My brother, accept the words I have spoken;  
even if you give your money, of all kinds;  
love between two people is lacking.

*I Have No More to Say: Love Is Finished*

What is that important thing you want to show me?  
There are many words, which remain to be verified;  
I have no more to say—love is finished!

This is not the way to please a heart;  
people are talking about you, because of what you did;  
how can you eat together with your husband?

Do not make light of it, the way you have been treated;  
because your condition is not what it once was;  
that surely is the evidence that you have been turned  
down.

If it had not been for eating together,  
you would be killing yourself for nothing, for someone  
who does not want you;  
this being turned down is not the same as being told  
to get out.

I warned you, stop your cunning,  
you please me only when you do no evil;  
you are playing with abundance, you will suffer poverty.

Do you not understand this, or is it on purpose,  
to be bled white without useful purpose;  
a useless thing does not last long; you could have been  
useful to yourself.

Deeds are sufficient for a man to understand;  
it is better to stay away and make yourself scarce;  
if you delay, you will be poisoned.

Handle your love affairs carefully, do not cause irritation,  
once the heart has turned away, it will not return.  
I am capable of love, but I can refuse it too.

Let us make a riddle, let us give it a description,  
let us speak of many things and let the people hear it  
clearly;  
he who does not fear a bull, must be himself a bull!

He that never strikes it lucky, will not be appreciated;  
to be luckless is disaster, it is to be caught sinning;  
where there are trees, there are no builders: luckless is  
the land untended.

No one gets wishes to whom they are not allotted;  
you may pretend pride, but you are only giving yourself  
trouble;  
love is a question of luck and predestination.

There is an end to all actions,  
my heart, be not deceived, you would have to bow down  
later;  
that is what one has to do in time, to see through the  
wicked world.

You are suffering in vain, but I am not prepared to go,  
nor even to intend it, nor indeed did I act,  
do not think that all is easy, much has to be built.

Great regrets, I feel sorry for what I miss,  
I cultivated a field—of withering trees,  
I planted good plants, I am reaping rotten things.

*Clandestine*

Circuitous, ambulatory,  
my feet trace darkened streets.  
Spurred on by an insatiable need  
to be fulfilled, I go down and  
around a new place with strange names.

Hugging brick walls I move  
wrapped in a full length cape.  
No one recognizes me here.  
I move clandestinely. Free!  
No one knows me here.

And then, at the end of the street,  
a sharp right turn, second house,  
third floor and two knocks.  
No one knows me here. I am here.  
Arrived. No one knows me here.

You wait, warm and strong. I enter  
a tight space. For a brief moment.  
Arrived! No one knows me here.

Your arms enclose me. I am here.  
Arrived! No one, no one knows me  
here. Only you and the sad smile  
playing around your mouth  
is loving. Is familiar.  
I am here!

## *Confessions*

I confess! I confess! I confess it all!  
I loved. I lied. I LOVED!  
It was not my fault! My heart is an  
enemy of my head. I have tried  
to synchronize my movements to lessons  
taught a thousand times by faithful  
and loyal servants of the past.

I confess! I did seek to deceive  
those who knew better. I did  
contrive to be alone. To sneak!  
Yes! Sneak out. Sometimes I ran  
out into the streets when all were  
asleep. For shame. I confess.  
I did crave the stolen moments  
in a hidden place. But it was not  
my fault.

Love is a body warm and loving. And  
I did love warmly. I opened and I gave.  
The private secrets of my body opened.  
My heart is my enemy. In that room,  
our self-imposed cell, we gave our  
courage to each other. To bear those  
moments of social deceit.

Yes, I am a traitor because I love without  
reserve the body of my enemy. His arms  
have held me. I have begged the kiss  
of his lips that each time sank me deeper.  
But, it was not my fault.

## Chez toi

My doors have been shut so long  
I am so acquainted with solitude.  
Our understanding is such that  
silence is all that is required.  
We know tonight in *your* house  
I will dine and dance alone.

It is by choice I tell you,  
that my heart refuses to flutter.  
My eyes blind to the sight of  
invitations from others.  
Your house is well cared for  
and waiting in patience.

And I am sitting here  
in my old rocking chair  
knitting a new sweater  
for you. Your pants are hung  
and shirts are folded.  
They wait and wait for you.

And when the barricades are torn  
and water runs freely;  
when teachers throw away  
Misinformation—then  
I shall pull back the  
curtains of your kitchen.

And when freedom sounds loud  
and guns are silent, my heart  
shall open and your house  
will be here . . . . . waiting.  
Waiting to receive you.

## *Alone*

I shall miss your weight,  
    your heavy hand holding me fast.  
I shall miss your presence  
    as I bathe, dress for bed  
    in my bed encircling me.  
I shall miss your kisses,  
    your caresses, your voice  
    in my ears.  
I shall miss you when you go away.

When you go, my cup of coffee,  
crumbs on my table cloth,  
ring of wet from my sweat  
drip glass, shall be consumed alone  
without your comments on the news,  
my schedule of postponed dates,  
last minute entries or dinner time.

But I shall look inside my memories  
and open a flood gate of times  
when we were alone. Were together.

And I shall wait patiently for  
the moment when you will fly out  
of my heart. And I will remove  
what I choose. Be content that  
you were here with me.

*Love Poem*

*También como la tierra  
yo pertenezco a todos.  
No hay una sola gota  
de odio en mi pecho. Abiertas  
van mis manos  
Esparciendo las uvas  
en el viento.*

*(Like the earth, I belong to  
everyone. There is not a single  
drop of hatred in my breast.  
Open wide, my hands scatter grapes  
in the wind.)*

—Pablo Neruda

When I return to see the sun's light they deny me  
my love  
we shall go dressed in peace  
and wearing a smile of flowers and fruit  
entwined  
along roads—twisting snakes  
among the coffee groves  
climbing from the mountains to the stars  
and to our shining dreams  
we shall go  
singing the songs that we know and do not know

When I return to see the sun's light they deny me  
my love  
we shall go  
then go briefly to weep  
on the countless graves of countless men  
who have gone  
without funeral or wake  
without hope for the sun's light they deny us

We shall go, my love  
and tell them  
I have returned, we are returning  
because we love each other  
and we love  
those countless graves of countless men.

When I return to see the sun's light they deny me  
with standards raised  
—freedom is a fruit of harvest—  
we shall go  
and gather corn cobs and colors  
and offer flowers and resurrection to the dead  
and to the living, the strength of our own lives  
my love  
we shall go  
and draw a rainbow on the paper sky  
for our son to play with:  
    rain may come and rain may go  
    if Our Lady wills it so  
    rain for the father's farm will run  
    and never, never send for the sun

We shall go, my love, we shall go  
when I return  
—the bars undone—  
and embraced together we'll make  
life, undeniable, continue  
in the gentle gifts of harvest  
in the chirping of startled birds  
in the march of men returning  
in the rains' hosannas on the reborn earth  
in the confident steps of a people resolved  
my love.

A fringe of new color will dress the earth  
we shall make kisses and smiles the tissue of life  
and between the endless cotton fields  
and the dances of a joyful feast

we shall go  
my love.

*Translated from the Portuguese by Margaret Dickinson*

*Letter from a Contract Worker*

I wanted to write you a letter  
my love  
a letter to tell  
of this longing  
to see you  
and this fear  
of losing you  
of this thing which deeper than I want, I feel  
a nameless pain which pursues me  
a sorrow wrapped about my life.

I wanted to write you a letter  
my love  
a letter of intimate secrets  
a letter of memories of you  
of you  
your lips as red as the *tacula* fruit  
your hair black as the dark *dilola* fish  
your eyes gentle as the *macongue*  
your breasts hard as young *maboque* fruit  
your light walk  
your caresses  
better than any that I find down here.

I wanted to write you a letter  
my love  
to bring back our days together in our secret haunts  
nights lost in the long grass  
to bring back the shadow of your legs  
and the moonlight filtering through the endless  
palms,  
to bring back the madness of our passion  
and the bitterness of separation.

I wanted to write you a letter  
my love  
which you could not read without crying  
which you would hide from your father Bombo  
and conceal from your mother Kieza  
which you would read without the indifference  
of forgetfulness,  
a letter which would make any other  
in all Kilombo worthless.

I wanted to write you a letter  
my love  
a letter which the passing wind would take  
a letter which the cashew and the coffee trees,  
the hyenas and the buffalo,  
the caymans and the river fish  
could hear  
the plants and the animals  
pitying our sharp sorrow  
from song to song  
lament to lament  
breath to caught breath  
would leave to you, pure and hot,  
the burning  
the sorrowful words of the letter  
I wanted to write you.

I wanted to write you a letter  
but, my love, I don't know why it is,  
why, why, why it is, my love,  
but you can't read  
and I—oh, the hopelessness—I can't write.

*Translated from the Portuguese by Margaret Dickinson*

*Elemental*

The man above is supposed to rain  
on the woman's cracked, hot earth.

But we have been so long tight-locked  
drenching each other with love swirls,  
we know neither plenty nor dearth,  
up nor down, mortar/pestle, fool/  
genius, hot/cold, pleasure/pain,  
blue/brown, sun, cloud, hail or rock

but one fecund storm-pool  
where all the elements whirl.

*Swimming Pool Sacrament*

My snorting serpent's  
angle sees wind splash  
the sky with spray plucked  
away towards banana leaves'  
ragged flutter, pulsing

like last night's wet-tight  
grip of brown and white  
limbs—snake-striped spasm—  
plunged into crystal depths.

For this death, birth and fluid  
life-growth by daytime  
body turbine self unscrewing  
is Extreme Unction, Baptism  
and drum-slashed Passage Rite.

### *The Tattoo*

You showed me the mark  
(like equation signs)  
inside your upper knees,  
and told me the tattooist  
warned it would make  
besotted any man who  
opened those thighs,  
and you yelped in glee  
at my mock-solemn sigh:  
“It works!”

### *Wet and Dry*

The deep pools of your river teem  
with fish, water splashes plentifully  
and rapids crash. My pitiful stream  
clogged with “ifs” and “whens”  
glugs into your mighty flow.

You blaze unconditionally, and cleanse  
dusty rooms with your light; you refract  
through wave-spray gratuitous rainbows,  
while the shadows of my pale beams  
creep from lunar crevices of the past.

My love is a desert flower, which fades  
as stringy tendrils cling to cracked  
rocks in search of lingering moisture,  
yours is a vast Morula tree, generous  
with sap and fruits, where my limbs  
can stretch, grateful for the shade.

*Go Crazy Over Me*

Come here.  
I want to pray for you.  
Go crazy over me.

Don't act like you don't care.  
Take off those clothes.  
What do you have to lose?  
I'm a free soul,  
Never afraid to laugh.  
Compassion lets me play  
A slave or a king,  
Happy to give away  
All that's given to me.

What do you say?  
Go crazy. It's ok.  
Love is the only thing to do  
And I know the way.

I don't want to complain  
That water is too thin  
And my shadow has run away,  
Leaving me with lies,  
Alone, bitter, vain  
And going crazy too,  
Since you're not crazy about me.

But don't worry.  
My prayer is not really true.  
If you really went crazy  
I wouldn't know what to do.

*Translated from Tigrinya by Charles Cantalupo with Ghirmai Negash*

*Will You, My Dark-Brown Sister?*

*Dikerama:* or, courting with “Grammars”

The following “grammars” are my recall, and poetic reformulation, of some of the colorful metaphors and images I remember being used by young men in courtship when I was a child. These young men, who had little or no schooling, had heard of something called “grammar,” which was taught at school to reveal the richness of the language. Each created his own grammars. Often they bragged to each other about the number of grammars they knew, and a spontaneous competition might start to see who had the most grammars. Fresh ones might even be created on the spot.

I have decided to add a new (fictional) voice, that of the young woman who responds to the young man’s pleas, something that would not happen in real life where she could only use body language.

I am a traveler  
I am weary  
I am hungry  
Night has descended upon me  
And I ask you, my sister, I say  
Won’t you open your door  
And let me in?

*You, a traveler who is weary  
who is hungry  
who is trapped in night’s darkness*

*I welcome you to rest under my roof  
to partake of meat and bread  
to come out of night’s deep shadows  
and resume your journey in the morning.*

I would have passed your house, my sister,  
On this long journey home  
But I saw the storm clouds gathering  
And I said to myself  
“My sister lives here  
My dark-brown sister

For whom, one day, the cattle in my father's kraal  
Will bellow till the hills respond  
She will take me in from the cold  
And wrap a skin kaross around me."

I have come, my sister,  
And am knocking on your door.

*Yes, I saw the storm clouds gathering  
Flashes of lightning blinding my eyes  
I heard the thunder shaking the earth*

*Come in, my dark-brown brother  
And rest a while  
Till the sky has spent its anger.*

I am like millet grains scattered on the ground  
With no one to pick me up.  
The birds are hovering over me  
Ready to descend and gobble me up  
With their beaks sharp as arrows.

Come, my sister,  
Won't you gather me up and save me  
From the anger of these hungry birds?

*You shall not be food for the hungry hawks  
You who were destined to sink deep into the earth  
To make the earth pregnant with nourishment  
So life may return again and again  
And the circle not be broken  
Like the sun's rising and setting and rising and setting  
Darkness and light linking hands forever and ever*

*I shall save you from the birds  
Place you in the granaries of time  
Till you can safely return to Mother Earth  
Where you belong*

I am the patient  
You are the doctor

My heart is ill  
My heart was wrenched from its place  
And it went away like a cow to *mafisa*  
When I saw you moving with the grace of a panther.

You, my sister, who induced my illness,  
You have the healing herbs  
To restore my heart to its place  
For my heart slipped away  
When I saw your brown body  
Tall and straight like the stem of the *mohlwaare* tree  
And I said to myself  
The one who made my heart go away  
Is the one who will restore it.

You are my *mmusapelo*, my dark-brown sister  
You are my heart-restorer.

Come, coax my heart with love  
And make it come back to its place.

*Since I am the one who induced your illness  
Since I am the one who wrenched your heart from its place  
Since I am the one who made your heart to go to mafisa*

*I shall, therefore, be your doctor  
I shall, therefore, be your heart-restorer  
And with healing herbs  
I shall coax your heart with love  
And make it come back to you*

Pick me up  
Open your door and let me in  
Wrap a skin kaross around me

Bring my heart back from *mafisa*,  
And my father's cattle will bellow louder,  
Point their horns towards your village,  
And pierce the membrane of innocence  
That separates you from me.

*Music of the Violin*

The gods favored me  
In my moment of loneliness  
Placed gently in my hands  
A Stradivarius  
Breathed into the Stradivarius and me  
The knowledge to sing

I play first a pizzicato  
With my nimble fingers  
I pluck I pinch I twitch I tickle the strings  
For naughty pleasures

Then up and down the scale  
A gentle brush with the bow  
And I tap and pat the sounding chamber

And, sensitive to a fault, the Stradivarius murmurs  
Sweet strains like human voices falling from heaven  
An anthem never before heard  
Now the soothing strokes from my hands  
Calm it to a gentle tempo

In the final strains,  
The Stradivarius speaks to me  
Entrances me with a diminished chord  
That hovers tantalizingly over the precipice  
Slides into a dominant chord  
To deliver us into a tonic statement

And the music of the violin floats away  
Floats away  
Away. . . . .

To live forever  
In the ensuing silence

*It Is Not the Clouds*

My Beloved  
it is not the clouds  
flitting across the moon  
nor the few windowed lights  
dotting the otherwise sleeping neighborhood

nor the floor beneath our feet  
reminding us we're secure on this deck

it is not this cool air  
first just a pleasant caress  
then daring us with a few degrees of cold  
till we said let's go inside

Nor is it the trees' soft love moans  
or the stars hardly visible tonight

No, my Beloved  
it is  
neither the clouds  
nor the moon  
nor the nightly widowed lives  
of sleeping neighbors  
in their silhouetted houses  
nor the breeze  
nor the stars

But you  
holding my hand  
reflecting in your eyes  
these interwoven meanings  
that speak of love

## *Red*

A little background to the poem below:

*I find a mysterious red ladies' glove in my mailbox on campus. A note on the glove says "For Marcy" (note the spelling). Questions: Who? What? When? Why? race through my mind. A little bit of sleuthing determines that a male professor from the Slavic Department was the doer of the deed. Marci (not Marcy) had dropped it in his car when he drove her home. (His wife was present . . . I'm told!) A sort of midnight escape from the Prince's ball?*

Red!  
Stop!  
Ask the question  
that hangs in  
the emptiness  
of the red glove

Glove!  
Red!  
the emptiness  
the question  
"Oh glove where is thy hand?"

"Did you, perhaps, slip off  
in the midnight rush  
when the princess and the charwoman  
collided at the palace door?"

My mind is a landscape  
of deserts and swamps and mountains  
rivers and dense forests  
which I traverse  
mocked by ever-receding horizons  
in search of the mysterious hand

No clues  
red silence

and a name  
on a slip  
in an unknown hand

“Marcy!”

*The Adventure in the Garden*

In the name of God, I begin my story,  
let me say what I want to say,  
may I be led by my heart,  
may the listeners be full of joy.

I was going out, going near a garden,  
and I saw a tree, a young coconut palm,  
and the guards who were guarding it,  
were present, under a baobab tree.

I spoke to them: "You who are on guard,  
give me one fruit of the tree."  
They said: "Come up to our price!"  
I said to them: "I will not give you what you ask."

One young boy appeared,  
and climbed up to look for me,  
for a reward, then he came back and told me,  
"I have picked one fruit, the best one."

Why has this fruit not yet been eaten?  
Like this one there are plenty in the bush;  
And I pursued the snail's trail,  
I felt neither worry nor sadness.

There the darkness began to spread,  
and my heart told me: "Go on!"  
I slid down from hill slopes and I climbed up,  
and I arrived in my home.

## *Ode to Mwana Munga*

Strike the buffalo horn  
with the branch of berrywood or munga tree.

Blast the ivory horn  
that resounds in the Sultan's palace,  
let its echo reverberate  
with the force of the elephant's voice.

Broadcast the echo,  
let it rouse the sleeping families,  
the women and the men,  
let them hurry here in crowds.

Assemble the noble ladies, the dignified daughters,  
and let them be seated here;  
let us blend our verses  
in praise of the Arabian lady.

Let us blend our verses,  
and scan them carefully,  
cast away the chaff  
and retain the good ones.

Let us pause here,  
arrange and refine our verses  
till they are concise enough  
to praise her delightful features.

My kinsmen, listen:  
I shall start with her head,  
her soft-silken hair  
long-flowing and supple.

This noble woman's head  
is as smooth as alabaster,

and well rounded  
like a perfect circle.

Her ears  
as she listens  
curve out perfectly  
like the blade of an anchor.

This lady's face, I swear,  
I have yet to see its peer,  
is beautifully molded  
and blooms with its radiance.

Her matching eyebrows  
are perfectly parallel  
and neatly join at the root  
as if they are knotted together.

Pitch-black,  
darker even than ink,  
they have joined hands  
like arching acacia branches.

Whether she closes  
or opens her eyes,  
her countenance always fills  
whoever is present with fear.

What a wonder her nose is;  
its holes are visible  
and number six  
for he who counts them.

But do not be amazed,  
if you look carefully,  
twenty stars  
are in her pupils.

Her cheeks,  
fresh as coconut flesh  
that yields squeezed oil,  
surpass all others.

Her lips are thin  
even when they are loosely closed;  
whatever she utters  
is lucid even to a simpleton.

Her teeth are lightning,  
whiter than ivory  
and as brilliant  
as the Arabian lights.

Her tongue is as fiery  
as the flame of a lantern;  
it is especially radiant  
whenever she recites the Koran.

Her mouth exudes  
fragrant whiffs of the musk  
of the civet perfume  
from the wild or tame civet cat.

Her chin is rare, wonderful,  
better than an almond,  
more delicious than a cooked almond,  
the Arabian Muscat nut.

Her neck is as long  
as a noble bamboo  
adorned with necklaces  
neatly strung together.

Her shoulders are smooth;  
they don't jut out

like glasses,  
but they curve round.

Her armpits, my brothers,  
where methinks a perfume tree grew,  
will ravish a man  
who sets his eyes on them.

The aroma that it exudes  
is sweeter than jasmine  
or the more fragrant  
aloe oil.

Oh how I desire  
her coral-colored nipples,  
pink like the inner flesh  
of the pomegranate.

I have neither witnessed  
nor have I ever seen  
such divine fruits  
as those of the Arabian Lady.

Even inside the cloth  
they already command respect,  
and when they are bared,  
a man's senses wander about.

Her belly is a cushion of flesh,  
pleasant folds and secret nooks;  
her navel is a gem that she can  
retract and close like a cameo.

Her navel is the bowl of a water-pipe  
crafted in Mecca;  
anyone who inhales its perfume  
will go dizzy with desire.

Heavy are her hips,  
perfect for the game of finger  
in the ring that has a gem  
that clamps an inserted finger.

The sweetness of this clamp!  
Captain, mind your compass needle!  
Even without touching it,  
it will begin to grip and squeeze.

Her little pool of fire,  
when I saw it,  
is neither long nor wide,  
and it is full of juice.

It was cloudy and cool  
with a soft pleasant breeze;  
I carefully rigged up my dhow  
and readied it for the voyage.

I unfurled the mainsail  
made from ten mats  
and very subtly  
I pressed the bowsprit forward.

I turned the helm  
and fitted the rudder;  
I felt its strong pull in the water  
as it glided towards Arabia.

So I entered the hold  
to check for the bilge,  
but after careful searching  
I found no bilge water.

So I descended to the bottom  
of the dhow, steered into the lagoon,

and when I reached the shore,  
I blasted a cannon.

Its explosion blazed!  
It reeked  
a Meccan aroma  
of the Arabian Lady.

When I inhaled her aroma,  
I shuddered  
as though from a cold  
and went in search of healers.

The little dove's thighs  
are like the butt of the royal clarion;  
her girlfriends, eaten by envy,  
curse her for it.

Her knees are special;  
they are famous, celebrated  
and well synchronized  
as they turn around each other.

Her calves are moderate,  
not too prominent,  
but like a flute's mouthpiece  
with a curved end.

The little rascal's foot soles  
are covered by Indian slippers  
of Arabian craftsmanship  
ornamented with paintings.

*Translated from the Swahili by Frank M. Chipasula*

## *The Song of the Lotus Tree*

To the Lady of the Lake I entrusted  
My sapling of the lotus tree that I planted,  
Shaded by the great iron mango tree,  
In the fertile soil of her compound.

As my lotus sapling was sprouting straight up,  
“Let us marry her off,” they urged, ignoring me.  
“Let us marry her off,” they clamored without reason;  
So I avoided her and I was depressed.

Without a suitor for her hand  
Why would you give her away?  
Together, you have excluded me;  
Why, I ask, have you done so?

The lotus-tree is mine by birthright,  
She is mine by divine inheritance,  
A legacy from my guardian,  
from the God of all Creation.

Listen all as I shower praises upon this tree  
whose seed comes from Arabia;  
God’s providence granted me this seed  
That descended from Yemen.

Let me praise before you, my kinsmen,  
This lady superior in grandeur and glory  
whose pedigree mocks any heavenly light  
like the moon shining in the sky.

She will be a pleasure to her husband  
whom she will fill with great joy;  
and he will return here laughing,  
praising God the Beneficent.

He will praise the Lord joyously;  
they will share pleasant laughter,  
while smiles grace their lips  
and joy gladdens their hearts.

He will pray to God for increase  
that He may populate the tree of paradise  
whose fruits resemble the apricot,  
the wild or Mediterranean pomegranate.

When the damp cool wind murmurs,  
she will sway like a youthful bamboo,  
and her leaves will resemble emerald,  
an incomparable green color.

When its flower begins to bloom,  
even a jewel will be as worthless  
as Venus, dawn's constant star,  
when day is about to dawn.

And when its fruit swells with ripeness,  
Its perfume is pleasant and aromatic;  
It appears neither too big nor too small,  
its surface harmonious and smooth.

Its peel is as soft as doe's pelt,  
Its leaves fluffy as birds' feathers;  
the fruit and the flower's fragrance  
is better than musk and saffron.

When a man picks and kisses her,  
She will withdraw timidly into herself;  
And when he harvests and eats her,  
she will ease his burning desire and distress.

Though the man who picks it may be sane,  
its sweetness, which surpasses Turkish delight,

will drive him completely crazy.  
Rejoice then in this gift from God the Giver.

Sugarcane is the grass of choice;  
it transports a man into rare delights.  
Here I end praising the sapling  
Of the tree from paradise,  
That has no peer upon this earth.

*Translated from the Swahili by Frank M. Chipasula*

*A Love Song*

It was good  
The orchestral dance  
Of our voices sipping dew  
In the soft morning-rise  
Of Africa south.  
That was good.  
We welcomed with a squeeze  
The hand of desire as it dabbled and dappled  
A summer mosaic  
Across the canvas of thighs  
Which swallowed the embrace  
Of live dreams  
It was good.

Now we swim in warm-baths  
Of our nakedness,  
Touching with our skin  
The subterranean regions  
Of our blood.  
We move with the heave of time  
Whose mouth is a fenceless water-fall  
Stretching,  
Turning some,  
Now mellowing in one, with one.

It was good,  
When tears watered the corpses  
From the storage of past tales,  
And tears circled their death  
Above the face  
Of the come of love  
That was good.

Then we sponged  
The ache of each beat  
With the blend of hope  
In sunbeam eyes  
As I saw mine mirrored in yours.

### *Another Song of Love*

In your loneliness  
your hurt eyes warmed to my love.  
In your glum  
you said I was a sunbeam.  
we hopped in and out  
of each other's heart and mind  
to nurse and nurture our young plant.

Then came days of revelry.  
Your time was full, too full  
sometimes I thought  
except for a civil gesture waved at me  
from time to time.  
I genuflected at the altar  
of your heart,  
with gifts of me;

You backed away because you had not  
counted  
on my tenacious love grips.  
With the spirits of our beginnings  
Inebriated by other spirits  
you prefixed frowning titles  
to my name.

In my loneliness  
I could not reach you.  
In my love  
you saw your smothering mother.  
But because I was not,  
your shadow grew more distant  
with the setting sun.

Now your burnt ashes float  
to mingle with others.  
And as I wait for another day  
I keep singing another song  
How did I go astray!

*Shanghai Suite*

(Our one heart)

If I should completely  
Cease to breathe  
Right now  
Especially  
After last night's tenderness  
Please bury my heart  
Where neither wind  
Sun  
Rain  
Nor maggot  
Can dare to feed  
On all such treasure kists

Because wherever I venture  
In this tropical haven  
Your presence turns  
Each breadth of mind  
Each breath  
Into chimes that  
Encircle our entire being  
With irresistible  
Currents  
Our charged bodies receive  
As they venture to give  
Sighs that write  
Countless  
Warm thoughts

So that  
Beloved  
Even in this separation  
I am drawn  
So close to your baton

That the tempo  
In the pulse  
Beats closer  
Then pulls  
Drawing  
To such pure pitch  
This timbre  
That defies  
Any intrusion  
Or curious stares  
Whenever we allow ourselves  
To be spirited  
Into a realm  
Made  
Just for us

Thus  
Now  
I plead after delicious death  
That we rest our  
New heart  
In the labyrinth  
Of some high mountain shade  
Where it must  
Triumph over centuries  
Whose star-crossed lovers  
Will come to  
Measure how  
Each weight  
Each gram  
Grain or atom  
In our preserved mummy  
So totally mixed  
Bonding us into  
Soul-blooded mates in this  
Our one heart

## *Jacarandas for Love*

How could I not think of you  
Wherever you might be right now  
Today  
This day that perfectly mixed  
Sun wind and vast blue  
With Jacarandas cast  
In fullest bloom  
Their most delicate short spell  
Stretched in arched canopy of sweet lavender  
In matrimonial splendor  
Along lavish Harare lanes  
Where purest fragrance baits and bathes senses  
In profuse delight

It is especially in this solo soul's paradise  
I wish you here  
Where the mad stampede of time  
Unearths roots that so deeply long  
To abandon forever the ember of single flights  
When even canaries flood above the head  
And such vivid gentle splashes  
Force the heart to pulse and swell  
With yet another warm hunger  
To lay itself bare  
Along the spring of your mellow blood  
And nurse that vacant season  
Vagrant for fulfillment wrapped in embrasures  
In the soft tremble of your soothing tears  
And the laughter of moans and groans dancing  
Whispered in enchantment of mating nights  
Where Jacarandas await to bless  
With soft petals  
Unloved lovely loveables alike  
Alive.

*Long-Distance Love*

If we had our country  
To mold in our hands  
So that this soft clay could shape the face  
And heart of freedom  
Each toll on love  
Each tick of distance  
Could be some blessing  
For I would have  
The rare fortunes of a bird  
After every mission abroad  
All encounters with foreigners  
Would reinforce the reason  
Turning the strange into loveliness  
The urgent to certainty  
Of reunion more desirable  
For like the birds  
Nightfall would kindly lead  
To favored nests  
To recount encounters  
Hatch new flights  
Till together we can soar  
To heights where such long-distance throbs  
Which may pulse pain  
Are ever foreign  
Being alone will be forever alien.

*This Morning*

This morning I visited the place where we  
lay like animals  
O pride be forgotten  
And how the moon bathed our savage nudity in purity  
And your hands touched mine in silken caresses  
And our beings were cleansed as tho by wine.

Then you stroked my breast  
And thro' love I shed the tears of my womb  
O sweet fluid spilled in the name of love  
O love  
O sweet of mine existence  
Your sigh of content as your lips touched my soul  
O joy shared by the wilderness  
O gentle breeze  
O fireflies that hovered over our nest in protective  
harmony  
How I yearn  
I feel you here again with me.  
See how the flowers, the grass, even the little shrubs have  
bloomed  
Even as I bloomed under the warmth of your breath  
And now they look at me; unashamed  
For they have been washed and watered by the love  
of your loins.

I stretch and sigh in warm contemplation  
For tonight I shall again possess you  
In me, I shall be content of all you render  
On account of love  
Under the stars I shall drink the whisperings of your body  
Speak again to the depths of my sensibility  
Tree of my life

Peaceful meadows  
Cow dares not moo here  
Ruler of the night  
Lord dynamo  
Let me not disturb your peace  
But let me lie with you again  
Be silent O silence  
Love has found its awakening

## *Farewell Love*

All I have to give is this loving thought  
A love that gold nor diamonds can buy  
Held out by a hand of love; no gloves  
Pure in its composition;  
That no dictionary of phraseology can bespoil  
Wrapped up with love  
With naught asked in return  
No acclamations nor favors  
But to understand  
This love I have always felt, will always know.  
We left many questions unasked  
Many kind words unsaid  
And harmony failed us  
But my part was always love  
And thro' that love I shall remember only the times we  
    loved  
And hope to you  
That when times start getting rough  
You shall think only of the times we called each other friend  
And hope shall bring us one day together again  
There will again be  
The fights,  
Reproach after reproach  
Inferiority and guilt shall again be inflicted  
And experiments on feelings of neglect  
And harmony shall again fail us  
Yet forever love  
A love that was born in a mother's womb we shared  
To friendship and sistership  
Adios!

### *Timeless Love*

Never again will this moment be ours  
My mind be filled with such certainty  
And fires burn my being with love  
Impeccable genie of love  
Bottled at the core of mine existence  
For cloud hanging over tree  
—Green tree  
Soft, kind and patient cloud  
White, pure and understanding . . .  
Cloud hanging over the silent afternoon  
Cloud stilled by Godly sanctity  
Watchful over the fire within me  
Sunlight, starlight, candlelight and heat  
Painless rocks and warm breeze . . .  
Yet pain and misery unavoidable  
For just like that cloud  
You shall at the end of this day depart  
And this moment of peace will be but a memory.

*We Part . . .*

the lorry driver's stressful glare  
arms still jolt akimbo,  
next to him his iron monster  
—Munya lies still  
a smile lingers on His face hardly formed  
i remember how his lips once whispered to mine  
when we languished in love's esteem

i still love you Munyaradzi  
though Your arm is crushed and gone  
Your sides like the breasts of age unbodiced  
the crowds steam in, hardly summoned,  
greasy heads peer through masses of humanity  
You despised them so  
stares grip Your heaped past  
yet You lie undisturbed  
beneath the tatters of Your clothes  
which this morning You so earnestly pressed  
i visualize Your caring face glowering  
So much life You were owed  
such promise  
Your face still shines  
You lie there unhearing  
proud like an everlasting pedagogue  
eyes open, watching, seeing naught  
at last You sleep.  
go home  
i've taken You this far  
You leave me  
An infant crying for its mother  
Your memory will always remain  
a cancer swelling within me,  
go home Munyaradzi  
the children call,

go home  
the coach waits  
they think they cover shame  
go home  
i follow close behind.

**Makhokolotso K. A. Mokhomo (Lesotho)**

*When He Spoke to Me of Love*

The day he first spoke to me of love  
The day he taught me in those words,  
The marvel in my breast, and dreams,  
I dreamed even in the middle of the day.  
My voice was burnt away, a fire  
In my throat licked at my words—  
In my pride I stood there quite dumb,  
All my face wet with happy tears.  
Fear struck fast and heavy at my side  
That he might change, and barking dogs  
Drive off the bridal cattle brought for me.  
I came trembling to him on my knees  
As if stooped down in a prayer of love.  
My beloved, his voice more sweet,  
His young mouth poured a stream of gold.  
My great one, he looked long into my face  
And my tongue, unstrung, confessed to him.

*I Want to Be All Things to You*

I want to be with you  
Like a grafted branch;  
I want to be your dark rind  
Close to the bark.  
When the whirlwind locks you in  
I want to be your taproot so you are not restless.  
I want to be your sunshine  
Your fountain in the drought  
Your lute I will be  
To voice your deepest thought.  
I want to be all things to you  
And you to be my wife,  
But, go ahead, spit in my face!  
One day you will be mine.

### *Maria's Photograph*

The beauty of my love is the rainbow colors  
Of sun's rays in dewdrops (only more radiant)  
Eliciting echoes from the stars.  
Her eyes sparkle like diamond's sparkles  
Her neck is balanced like a giraffe's,  
Her poise is majestic like a palm tree unswaying.  
Yet stars are enduring  
Like the firmaments they are  
While my love's beauty is brittle like glass  
That at a snap shatters into a thousand bits;

Mr. Photographer, take a picture of Maria,  
Frame the image for me to keep  
That captures those features I admire:  
The glitter in her eyes, the crystal in her teeth,  
The twinkling smiles that reach to the moon,  
Brown earth her skin, soignée black her hair  
Glistening as she tills the rain-washed garden . . .  
Please, take a picture of Maria  
And frame it for me to keep;

But a photograph fades with time  
Edges chip, frame wastes,  
Sheen rubs off with constant hands,  
And the texture of Maria I admire  
Will relapse into the brown-grey of age.  
I would rather weave Maria into song  
Hummed whenever this page is sung,  
I would sing her features for ever.

### *Search for a Bride*

*Lubani* lavender will give her away,  
Or else her melodious voice.  
I will move in ivory light at dawn,  
Comb ridge after ridge of the green landscape,  
For I am the shell-necklace lover of the hills,  
Intent on finding Tasiyana for a bride.  
Only the speckled pigeon's cooing  
Can explain to me now, note by note,  
Why I should stop the search for my bride.  
I will know her, I am certain,  
By the mark of her bracelet,  
The sunspots on her freckled face  
And the sheen of her shell necklace.  
I will woo her with the nimble feet of an *ingoma* dancer,  
I will unlace her sunbrown mountain sandals, and  
Untie her loin cloth of black, red and green,  
Bright like flames on the lake,  
And I will engulf her with the fire of my loins.  
But should any mortal come between her and me,  
I will turn to the sun and blind her with my blood.

## *The Feet of a Dancer*

for Natasha, watching her play the viola

Some healer, perhaps, in the magic of her past,  
taught her to sing in unison with the seasons.  
Neck outstretched, preening as a locking wagtail,  
unfettered, hands flicking, she plays the harp and sings.

Then she starts dancing. I say  
it is her soul, those feet, as nimble in grace  
as a gazelle's in the Savannah. Her gait glazed in the dim light,  
her feet rapping, she rises, widely framed beauty.

My eyes flutter and I fly back many years to Thoza:  
the green brooks where I grew up, where  
neighbors and game share the same spaces,  
in a flash I fly twenty-some years and recall

Another dancer: glazed in the wind, turning to her *vimbuza* dance,  
she raps into ankle-bells, pausing,  
waiting for the call of my drum, poised,  
walking rows of gleaming initiates—what can I do  
but let linger my gaze on the luminous flush of her nipples.

I say: I have heard your voice in the fields at home,  
and I call it the scented sun flowers of the veld,  
the creek orchids in bloom  
before they extinguish their thunder-red life.

I say: I have seen your feet cut up the plateaux,  
and I call them rivulets and groves of the veld,  
water that colors and livens the land, flowing  
from thunder, which is the sound your dance makes.

### *Waiting for You*

The orange light of dawn  
Reflected morning dew  
Doused our faces blank,  
Stripped all colors from ochre-painted walls  
Jutting into space like crops of rock.

We watched sunbirds break the quiet of morning,  
And against the same fire-red backdrop of dawn  
I wanted to feel the long curves of your body,  
Your hands wrapped around mine,

Your sweet whispers soothing the rough edges  
Of my mind, erasing all doubts of your love.  
And here, if I thought it would make you smile,  
I would point out our shadow against the wall,

Point out that fullest side of the moon  
That changes the tide, our dark companion  
That'll never walk away from us. Yearning for you,  
I intend to live fully by it.

*A Poem to His First Wife*

I would rather have the small boat,  
my first little vessel,  
although it was unsteady and shaky,  
the waves never rose above her head;  
but she drowned near Ngozoa  
on a dark night.  
That is what I am thinking about today,  
it makes me feel confused and numb.

My little boat, my seaworthy boat,  
when I first made it float on the water,  
it was full of playfulness,  
and I was pleased and charmed by it;  
I crossed over on it to the other shore,  
and the waves did not rise above it.  
That is why today I am thinking about her,  
it makes me feel confused and numb.

Male lions and elegant ladies,  
listen, I have something to say:  
I spurned the villages  
and the voyages in a small craft;  
today I remember the beautiful boat  
on which I could hoist and lower the sails.  
Oh, the gift and the receiver,  
When it will meet him.

Oh, the receiver and the gift,  
the gain that gives a man his growth!  
Although she was a small child  
of timid character, yet she inspired respect;

there was great benefit in her,  
she longed for austerity.  
Oh, illness and recovery,  
when the latter meets the former.

Oh, health and sickness,  
the one who has the latter becomes ugly,  
he goes a long, long way,  
in order to find good health;  
when he finds that it is over for him,  
he wants to go and show himself happily.  
Oh, the soul and life  
when they meet.

Oh, life and the soul,  
when life is finished for a mortal,  
he praises the Lord,  
that is a good thing, it adorns him;  
on the Last Day, before God,  
may the path to Paradise not throw him off.  
Oh, paradise and the mortal soul,  
when they meet.

Oh, the mortal soul and paradise,  
when he first settles down in it,  
he will ask for favors  
of the Prophet who forgives;  
what he likes he will see  
with all that he desires.  
Oh, joy and the heart,  
when they at last will meet!

*When We Shall Meet, You and I!*

If my messenger arrives,  
my representative from Mombasa,  
he will come with a letter,  
a very good one, and bring it to you;  
or in case he should deliver it orally,  
he would speak the words to you.  
But there is no way  
of seeing you personally.

But there is no way  
of seeing the bright light of your face,  
so I am postponing  
coming to you for a visit.  
No penetrable place to penetrate  
can I see with my eyes,  
so I am undetermined,  
and unable to meet you.

So I am undetermined what to do;  
otherwise I should already have appeared,  
without feeling dissatisfied with myself,  
I cleared my conscience, I would go;  
but I fear the guards  
who are on duty all the time.  
So I checked myself  
and did not go to see you.

So I checked myself,  
although my heart could not bear it;  
I tried to persuade my heart away from love,  
after that I even tried to make it forget.  
I am not afraid to put pressure on it,  
so as to reduce its longing for you,  
its longing that results from missing the light  
of seeing you.

Because of missing the light,  
that brightness that continues shining,  
I see a great darkness all the time,  
wherever I turn my gaze.  
Do not think that it pleases me to stay away,  
it was not for that reason that I refused to come!  
I am in love, I cannot forget  
the hope of seeing you again.

I am in love, I have not forgotten  
my beloved friend.  
You accepted me out of kindness,  
with compassion and grace.  
How could I wish to stay away from you  
today, these days or any other time?  
How can I refuse  
to see you?

How could I refuse  
to come to you, my little turtle-dove?  
You are the crown-pearl in the necklace  
which it would be a joy to string!  
It dispels sadness  
at the moment I put it on.  
Deserting you would be folly;  
not to see you would be impossible for me.

To let you go would be impossible,  
foolishness forever;  
but you must watch your honor,  
it is not a negligible thing.  
And to go as far as to spoil that  
is a thing I refuse to do.  
But do not think I had an aversion  
to seeing you again.

Do not think I had an aversion,  
you graceful beauty,  
child of pure superior stock,  
without stain or blemish!  
I did no evil things,  
otherwise you would have been dishonored.  
I will love your appearance  
when you and I meet!

## *The Shawl*

You, my letter on Syrian paper,  
go about it in a white man's way;  
go to that good Muslim woman,  
that woman who does good works for God!  
When you have greeted her,  
speak to her with humility,  
take me and my friends,  
"Give me my shawl!"

My shawl that makes such a rich rustling noise,  
which I gave you as a present;  
I was surprised to learn that you were wearing it,  
while you were going round in search of men.

I did not know, when I first met you,  
that things would be like this;  
now take off that shawl at once,  
and give it back to me.

That place where you go every night, my girl,  
when the sun has set,  
you do not hear the call to prayer,  
because you are carried away by love.  
Tell your friend to go to the market,  
he will buy one just like this;  
don't stop taking it off,  
and give me my shawl.

Even if I borrowed money for it,  
I shall pay its price eventually.  
The custom with a debt is that one pays;  
even you know these things.  
Greedy female,  
gradually your body will become ugly.

You and me, no remedy will cure our relationship,  
I want my shawl.

Give it to me personally, at once,  
before disgrace descends on your head.  
I, Muyaka, will not be deceived,  
Don't you try and cheat me.  
When we first met, I had no suspicions,  
and I expected that we would stay together,  
but now, at least, you have been useful to me,  
let me have my shawl.

If you say I have no use for it,  
I will send it to my mother;  
this is just the thing she loves,  
she will go and wrap herself in it.  
As for you, I am afraid of you,  
I cannot let you have it.  
I will not let you have a cubit,  
give me my shawl.

*In the Village*

for Nosipho

Daughter of our unforgotten ancestral chain  
When you hear a bird singing in the tree  
It is singing our traditional love song  
About the good rains we had through the years  
About our good harvest we longingly remember

Daughter of our unforgotten ancestral chain  
My love feelings for you flew out of my hut today  
Destined for your father's far-away homestead  
Bringing good news about our destined togetherness  
That will make every villager happy to have a feast

Daughter of our unforgotten ancestral chain  
We shall bring you bracelets made from copper  
Designed by the master blacksmith of the village  
For your majestic beautifully created arms  
Plus of course our joint creative designs.

### *Desert Sandwich*

The gods must have created my land with a purpose  
To give the colonial conquerors a fatal dose  
If along the Skeleton Coast they dared to pose  
For a portrait or grow a multi-colored rose  
Here they died of thirst or bled through the nose  
Thus, just make an attempt and we'll ceaselessly oppose.

The gods must have created my land with a purpose  
To leave me with my less-demanding spouse  
Her vase empty without a yellow or red rose  
Yet when the rains come our soil gets a dose  
From Mother Nature that's more than a rose  
For she'll abundantly expose.

The gods must have created my land with a purpose  
When hunting I always carefully chose  
My arrow smeared with a deadly dose  
To kill a selected animal, never to arouse  
Suspicion amongst those as elders pose  
Protectingly what the gods created with a purpose.

*A Bouquet of Roses for You*

(On Maria Eugénia's birthday)

A bouquet of roses for you  
—roses red white  
yellow blue—  
roses for your day

Softness and freshness  
in the anxious curves of the earth  
and the poetic exaltation of life  
—softness and freshness for your day

The joy of friendship  
in the cheerless grimace of death  
and on the catalyzing sap of affection  
joy and friendship for your day

And on your day  
in me too a melting  
of anxieties and emotions  
of sadness and anger  
of certainty and faith  
and all the tiny shades of varied life  
mingled in the kaleidoscopes of the horizon  
and all hopes

A bouquet of roses for your day

The fraternal embrace of the setting sun  
and of the nascent moon  
the urgent defeat of the old  
and the growth of the new  
in each step of the days  
in each hour of the days

in each of your smiles;  
all shades of matter  
aridity of deserts  
and fecundity of founts  
grace of tigers  
and docility of doves  
fury of rivers  
wrath of winds  
and disconcerting human variation  
hatred and love  
yellow smiles in the hypocrisy of souls  
cries moans abundance and misery  
all gathered  
in the bouquet of roses  
for your day

The bitter taste of imminent spring  
comes pregnant with force  
comes full of despair  
and frustration  
and no possible defeat  
can dethrone the force conveyed  
in the bitter taste of imminent spring  
and in each one of your days

Force and certainty  
in the bouquet of roses  
for your day

And the place conquered on earth  
by the men of machines  
and super-sound  
through fraternity  
and through friendship  
shall always be theirs  
and also yours and ours

even if waters leap from their beds  
and eroded mountains  
release the winds

A place conquered  
in the bouquet of roses  
for your day

A bouquet of roses for you  
—roses red white  
yellow blue—  
roses for your day  
and Life!—for your day

Tenderly I wrap them  
in the fleeting yearning  
of a brief winter.

*Translated from the Portuguese by Marga Holness*

## *Two Years Away*

Greetings—you say in yesterday's letter  
when shall we see each other  
soon or later  
tell me love?

In the silence  
are the talks we did not have  
the kisses not exchanged  
and the words we do not say  
in censored letters

Against the dilemma of today  
of being submissive or persecuted  
are our days of sacrifice  
and audacity  
for the right  
to live thinking to live acting  
freely humanly

Between dreams and desire  
    when shall we see each other  
    late or early  
    tell me love!  
more justly even grows  
the longing to be  
with our peoples  
today always and ever more  
free free free

*Translated from the Portuguese by Marga Holness*

*Silent Girl*

Sweet silent girl  
what makes you speak not  
what makes you speak not  
of our days, and the days before?  
what makes you speak not but only in silence  
with your lips tight and tongue pressed against  
your teeth by your pressing thoughts?  
Is it because of the sneering, nagging present?  
the present that has scorched yams, corn and minds,  
the present that has turned babies into adults  
and adults to babies, babbling babies  
learning how to crawl and walk—  
the present that has turned night sounds  
of rural peace to sounds of exploding shells  
and rattling guns and raucous laughter of death  
and days of promise to heavy heart crushing days;  
The present that has dried us all of emotion  
and the youth of youth like harmattan the trees of living sap.  
Let's break with the past that bred the present  
and let today be reminder of tomorrow  
though tomorrow may only be a dream  
as dream may vanish in our waking  
or may survive—you, the silent one or me who sings.  
So be silent sweet girl  
I'll be silent, speak in silence,  
and let's recline on tomorrow of our dream  
in the shadows of our silent thoughts  
away from the hot sneering days.

## *To Paveba*

When young fingers stir  
the fire smoldering in my inside  
the dead weight of dead years rolls  
crashing to the ground  
and the fire begins to flame anew,

The fire begins to flame anew  
devouring the debris of years—  
the dry harmattan-sucked trees,  
the dry tearless faces  
smiling weightless smiles like breath  
that do not touch the ground.

The fire begins to flame anew  
and I laugh and shout to the eye  
of the sky on the back of a fish  
and I stand on the wayside  
smiling the smile of budding trees  
at men and women whose insides  
are filled with ashes, who  
tell me, "We once had our flaming fire."

Then I remember my vow.  
I remember my vow not to let  
my fire flame any more. And the dead  
years rise creaking from the ground  
and file slowly into my inside  
and shyly push aside the young fingers  
and smother the devouring flame.

And as before the fire smolders in water,  
continually smoldering beneath  
the ashes with things I dare not tell

erupting from the hackneyed lore  
of the beginning. For they die in the telling.  
So let them be. Let them smolder.  
Let them smolder in the living fire beneath the ashes.

## *To a Star*

### **1**

I strain my tired voice in song  
to reach up to the star by the moon  
a song I vowed never more to sing;  
But from sundown to sunrise  
I seek a union continually  
which breaks my vow and I sing  
a silent song to the rhythm of ageing drums  
drums not heeding constraints of fear  
Bear the song tenderly toward the ear

But enfeebled by layers of falling years  
the muted song reaches not the star

Still with a beggar's persistence I sing  
vainly seeking harmony with song and drum  
drum waxing louder, fed by each passing day  
But it echoes only in the hills of dead years  
and reaches not the STAR by the moon

Yet I dare to hope for a confluence of songs  
    Mine enfeebled, sluggish  
    The STAR's bright, engulfing  
This song of creation in my head revolving

### **2**

Who can stop this sacred song  
that chains heart to heart?  
this song that defies the seer  
    hard to hear?  
This song that forbids discord  
but thrives in lasting accord?

O let not this be as those  
which lie scotched like rose  
trampled by passing years  
Before it reaches the STAR

**3**

I am tired, tired!  
my trembly feet drag.  
Those in blood-bond  
pass me by in their dream  
And I, chastened by their passing  
Drag my tired feet along  
in pursuit of my own dream.

## *Celestial Song*

### **1**

Your song is celestial song  
and so in “different plane”  
mine is terrestrial song  
and so is vain  
vain, but it seeks ceaselessly  
like rushing water the sea.  
Let yours come down in drips  
in crystal drips of starry light  
to illumine the approaching night.

### **2**

My song vainly climbs  
like smoke from humble hearths.  
It rises from lowly depths  
to reach up to your song  
but it is muffled by racing clouds.  
So let yours come down in drips  
just in drips, drips of starry song  
To strengthen my trembly feet.

*Juket*

Juket broke up with me and left.  
I don't know why.  
Not enough love? Another guy?  
What can I do?

Curse God and die?  
I can't get her out of my head.  
I feel beat up.  
Happiness is being dead

And not in love.  
Will she ever want me again?  
Maybe one of my poems would make  
Juket listen?

*Juket, I'm your faithful dog,  
On guard and coming when you say.  
Tell me to follow and I will  
Only seeing your body sway,  
Not caring if my legs fall off.  
I'll hold on by your eyelashes  
And eyes as sharp as the gazelle's.  
Your teeth and smile will bathe my soul  
Like milk and keep me out of hell.  
Letting your long hair tumble down  
Your round breasts to your narrow waist,  
You know I'm starving for a taste.  
Wine beads the bottle of your neck.  
It's like a spring I want to drink.  
I'm like a wasp, but you're the sting  
All the way down, pointing your legs  
And up to the chocolate cake  
Of your cheeks, where I breathe new life.*

Maybe something like this will bring  
My Juket back  
And she will sing  
*I see you suffering. Enough.*

If not, I'm stuck  
Out in the cold  
With no one and nothing to make  
Life worth living.

*Translated from Tigre by Charles Cantalupo with Ghirmai Negash*

*Words Catch Fire*

Words catch fire  
On the bliss of the moment  
As I stalk my way through  
The forbidden territory between your legs  
The beckoning petals of your eyes  
The succulent eternity of your warm, obliging lips . . .  
Touching legs, tangled tales  
Delicious softnesses, desires so divine!

My will is a whisper, your moan a method  
I, your sin,  
Committed between two holy mountains  
And a valley of carnal angels

*Puzzle*

What should I do to gain your nod

Should I lie like a politician  
swagger like a soldier  
prattle like a poetaster

Should I lay absent fortunes at your door  
rob a bank  
poach forget-me-nots from an enemy's garden

Should I stand on my head  
sleep with eyes open  
pen your praise in blood

Should I send the wind to your roof  
lace your leisure with imps  
ask *sigidi*\* to dance for you

Should I become your slave  
run your every errand  
your chain golden iron around my neck

Or

Should I charm you with my songs  
lead you by the quiet waters  
get your dream to yes my plea?

\* Yoruba effigy feared for its mischief.

*Divine Command*

"What must I do?" I ask,  
"before I throw my hands around your waist?  
What must I do  
before I inherit the queendom of your softness?"

"Raise your hand," you say,  
"and pluck me the moon;  
go down to the sea  
and bring my buried jewel

Cook my yam  
with the fire of a cockscomb;  
set me a-sail  
on the spittle of an ant

Make my drum  
with the prepuce of a prince;  
sing me a song  
from the fair of fairies."

## *You Are*

You are my Earth  
my root, my roost

The roof above my dreams  
fireplace for my frozen feelings

You are the Temple of my Desire  
with a thousand inner rooms and a thousand echoes

You are the race  
which lends a name to my legs

The infinite destination  
shepherdess of my nomadic fancies

You are the Rain  
which fell before the sky

My flood, brown every moon  
with pagan promise

You are the river rippling coastwards  
with tales of upland regions

My sea of blue songs  
capering clams and dancing minnows

You are the smoke  
which blends with my evening sky

My horizon of infinite past  
and liquid futures

You are a song so sweet in its tempting distance  
my ears yearn for the magic of your softness

*Love in a Season of Terror*

I wanted so much to come  
but there were corpses across the path

The Generals, drunk on beer and blood,  
emptied mortar shells into surging crowds,  
in desperate awe of a foe called Democracy.

Loud was the chaos which became our noon;  
the sun took cover behind a phalanx of clouds  
the great *odan* tree was a fog of scream and smoke

Oh how gravely your absence unclothed my heart!

These, precious one, are seasons of terror.  
Criminals in khaki have seized the streets  
weighted down by a mess of medals

Their muftied cronies, robes flowing,  
parade tongues filed into fangs  
by venal licking of boots . . .

How does one love in times like these, Beloved:  
with bazookas coming between our lips,  
the General threatening us with the bayonet

Between  
his  
legs?

### *Tender Moment*

And you smile your big-cheeked smile,  
Your eyes breaking out of your face  
Like the sun through the mist  
Of a young and ancient dawn;

Your lips play around the base  
Of your teeth,  
A laughter erupts, fresh  
As the frothy song of a mountain stream

Finding rippling echoes  
In the hard-soft depth of unseen things  
And the fable of inchoate showers  
Which tease the thighs of sprawling fancies

Your eyes memorize the hours,  
Stretch dry moments into succulent eternities  
Then run them d-e-e-p  
Like the Zambezi of our rooted longings

You are the fragrance  
Which lends a name to varnished gardens,  
The door to which hums the chronicle  
Of the house . . .

And so you said:

*"Let us go behind the walls*

*And I will show you*

*The birthmark below my navel"*

Jean-Joseph Rabéarivelo (Madagascar)

*There You Are*

(from *Translations from the Night*)

There you are  
standing straight and bare!  
You are mud and you remember it;  
but truly you were born of the parturient darkness  
that feasts on lunar lactogen;  
slowly then the trunk in you took shape  
above this little wall that dreams of flowers clear  
and the scent of waning summer.

To feel, to think that roots sprout from your feet  
and run and twist like thirsty serpents  
toward some subterranean stream,  
or fix themselves in sand  
and bind you to it even now,  
you, O living,  
unknown, unassimilated tree,  
who swell with fruits that you yourself will gather.

Your summit  
of hair tousled by the wind  
conceals a nest of insubstantial birds  
and when you come to share my bed  
and I recognize you, O my errant brother,  
your touch, your breathing, and the odor of your skin  
will rouse the sound of mystic wings  
until we cross the border into sleep.

*Translated from the French by Ellen Conroy Kennedy*

*from* Old Songs of Imerina Land

Imaginary tremolo.

The daughter had come to meet me

When her parents took the notion to prevent it.

I spoke soft words to her.

She did not answer.

You will grow old there, you and remorse:

We and love

Shall go home to our house.

Thursdays for he-who-has-good-fortune,

Fridays for he-who-has-a-sweetheart.

Bring me strong tobacco

To chew as a digestive;

Bring me gentle sayings

That I may root my life in them.

Let come what may.

If my father and mother must die

I must find an amulet to bring back life;

If my love and I must part

May the earth and sky be joined.

The wife of another, O my elder brother,

Is like a tree that grows by a ravine,

The more one shakes it, the more it takes root,

Take her at night, take her in the evening,

Only he who takes her

May have her altogether.

Poor blue water lilies:

All year long up to their neck in tears,

Blades of water grass,

Reeds, rushes, ponds dragged by canoes,

Give me sanctuary, I am so unfortunate!

Steal a bit of love for me: I am another's.

Delight in your wife.  
He who has no pepper  
Takes no delight in eating.  
He who loses his fishing net  
Will have nothing to fry.  
And I, if I lose you,  
Will lose my nearest kinsman.

### *XVIII*

Close by, to the north, there were two oranges: one was ripe, the other so beautiful it made one happy. I gave the ripe fruit to the Cherished One and the one-so-beautiful-as-to-bring-happiness to the Beloved. But I cherish the one and truly love the other in vain. If either had a passion to subdue me, I would not know what to do.

### *XLVII*

—May I come in? May I come in?  
—Who is there? Who is it?  
—It is I, the first born of my mother and my father.  
—The first born of his mother and his father. The one who wears brightly colored clothes and carries high his head? The one who hops into his shoes and goes to lie inside his litter? In that case, come in, young man: the calf is neatly tied, and my father and my mother are away. But if you're seeking robes as fine as wings of dragonfly or locust, look elsewhere. And if you come for short-lived love, I'd rather give you up before than after.

### *LVII*

A wife is like a blade of grass: she stands upon her feet but is easily withered. A husband is like a clump of seaweed: he flourishes in water but is easily shredded.  
—Young man, how many loves have you?  
—I have hardly any, cousin, for they are only seven: the first, who cuts my fingernails; the second, who takes over for the one who stays at home when we go out; the third, who replaces the second in emergencies;  
the fourth, who follows me with longing eyes when I depart; the

fifth, who comes to meet me when I return; the sixth, who nourishes my life as much as rice; the seventh, who doesn't mix with the crowd, and even if she does, always manages to make herself distinguished.

*Translated from the French by Ellen Conroy Kennedy*

Jacques Rabémananjara (Madagascar)

*The Lyre with Seven Strings*

You will follow me, pale Sister,  
Chosen before the dawn of the world!  
Bride when the earth was still without form and void  
Sole reason of the Creation! Power of my destiny!

You will come.  
Vain  
Will be the cries of your blood, the grumbling pride of your race.

You will follow me.  
March of love! Flight of the dove!  
O Freshness of the first morning!

Your brothers  
Have grown deaf,  
insensible even to the smell of powder, to the fury of the thunder.

Harder  
than granite their hearts drunk with carnage and death.

The sweetness of your message, my sister,  
has only moved the myriad ranks  
of the stars,  
only moved my primitive soul,  
mirror and sole reflection of your lot.

They have understood nothing  
in the tumult of the massacre, in the glowing of the fires.  
Folly  
has galloped  
whinneying  
from the entrails of the abyss to the rent summit of space and sky.

Yet from the four points of the horizon  
arise  
the sounds of a trumpet and curves of your high  
melodies,  
O Peace!  
Daughter of the dolorous Earth!  
Image of the Loved-one, honey of spring on the blue  
banks of Assoussiel.

You will come, pale Sister, to the country of dreams, to the banks  
of royal springs.  
White, white the orchid at the peak of the Hill of Alassour!  
The paths are aglow with peonies under the fires of immemorial  
colors.  
And the breeze from the South troubles the virginal pool with the  
whispered secrets of love.

*Translated from the French by Dorothy Blair*

*The Common Lover's Song*

Do not love me, cousin,  
like a shadow  
for shadows vanish with the evening  
and I would keep you with me  
all night long;  
or like pepper  
which makes the belly hot  
for then I couldn't  
satisfy my hunger;  
or like a pillow  
for then we'd be together  
while we're sleeping  
but hardly see each other  
once it's day;  
or like rice  
for once swallowed  
you think no more of it:  
or like sweet words  
for they evaporate;  
or like honey  
sweet enough but all too common.  
Love me like a lovely dream,  
your life at night,  
my hope by day;  
like the silver coin  
I keep close on earth  
and on the great voyage,  
a faithful companion;  
like a calabash,  
intact, for drawing water  
in pieces, bridges for my lute.

### *Old Merina Theme*

Plants grow  
driven by their roots  
and driven by my love I come to you.

At the top of the great trees, my dear,  
the bird completes his flight.  
My journeys are not done until I'm close to you.

The cascades of Farahantsana tumble, tumble.  
They fall, they fall but do not break.

My love for you, my dear,  
like water on the sand.  
I wait for it to sink, it rises.

Two loves sprang up together  
like two twins.  
Misfortune to the first who is untrue.

Farewell, my dear, farewell,  
careless love may fool the eye,  
uncertain love brings madness.

Uncertain love, my dear,  
like mist upon the pond.  
There's much of it, but not to hold,  
for mist upon the pond, my dear,  
flirts and then is gone  
while avoko flowers  
settle 'round the fields.

A chicken snatched by the papango, dear,  
and carried high grows lonely  
far, far from his love.

Morning memories benumb,  
daytime memories tire,  
evening memories are delicious,  
don't you think, my darling?

The two of us, my dear:  
a speck of sand caught in the eye  
a tiny thing, but dazing!

The two of us, my dear:  
clay accumulating bit by bit  
that grows into a house of brick.

Hurry, hurry then  
my love,  
or night will overtake you.

My limbs will break,  
my eyes see dimly,  
tell them I can do no more.

Let twilight cover up the earth—  
my heart is in eternal moonlight.  
Come then to my side.

They'll scold me at home.  
my elder sister says I mustn't go with you,  
but I don't mind her.

I love, but can do nothing.  
I love, but am afraid.  
I'll come, but you come with me, dear.

The door is closed, my dear,  
you come too late, my love,  
they'll scold me.

Open up, I'll tell you secrets—  
open up, so we can talk,  
open up, I love you!

The door is closed, my darling,  
but my heart is open.  
so do come in: I love you, cousin.

Is the door not made of reeds, my love,  
that you close it with a key?  
Open up to me, I'm tired of waiting.

*Song of a Young Girl*

Oaf

the young man who lives down there  
beside the threshing floor for rice;  
like two banana-roots  
on either side of the village ditch,  
we gaze on each other,  
we are lovers,  
but he won't marry me.

Jealous

his mistress I saw two days since at the wash house  
coming down the path against the wind.  
She was proud;  
was it because she wore a lamba thick  
and studded with coral  
or because they are newly bedded?  
However it isn't the storm  
that will flatten the delicate reed,  
nor the great sudden shower  
at the passage of a cloud  
that will startle out of his wits  
the blue bull.

I am amazed;  
the big sterile rock  
survived the rain of the flood  
and it's the fire that crackles  
the bad grains of maize.  
Such this famous smoker  
who took tobacco  
when there was no more hemp to burn.  
A foot of hemp?  
—Sprung in Andringitra,  
spent in Ankaratra,  
no more than cinders to us.  
False flattery

stimulates love a little  
but the blade has two edges;  
why change what is natural?  
—If I have made you sad  
look at yourself in the water of repentance,  
you will decipher there a word I have left.  
Good-bye, whirling puzzle,  
I give you my blessing:  
wrestle with the crocodile,  
here are your victuals and three water-lily flowers  
for the way is long.

*Translated from the French by Gerald Moore*

### *Choice*

—Who is she whose-feet-go-clattering-the-hard-ground?  
—The daughter of the new chief-of-thousand.  
—If it is the daughter of the chief-of-thousand  
    tell her soon the night will fall  
    and that I will exchange love red as coral  
    for a hint of friendship.

—Who is she-who-comes-from-the-north?  
—The sister of the widow-with-the-jamero-se-perfume.  
—Tell her to come in without delay,  
    I will prepare her something good to eat.  
—She will not taste it, if I know her:  
    she takes only rice water  
    not because she is thirsty  
    but capricious about you.

*Distress*

—Ohé, long-haired beauty!

—Who goes there?

—I am the one cursed by my father, cursed by  
my mother; though small I'm dressed in silk;  
though taciturn, my thinking is profound; though  
easily chilled I am amber from the sun; being  
sensitive, I am sentimental all the more;  
a wanderer, though supple is my gait.

—The water cowrie is tiny too, young man;  
but many oxen are its victims.  
Silent is a glance and yet how eloquent.  
As for me I like a bronze skin best,  
it gives more warmth.  
Nostalgia has a sweetness too  
but not from he-who-rubs-his-nose-in-it.  
So sink, young man, collapse!  
Go founder in your dreams.  
Tomorrow's sunrise will be rather late  
for I and pining  
will be gone  
tonight.

*The Water-Seeker*

A Dove is she  
who goes down  
the rocky path  
sliding like  
a capricious pebble  
on the steep slope  
towards the spring.

The water-seeker.

She descends  
with clumsy care,  
catching  
time and again  
with one hand  
on the aloe leaves  
smooth and pointed,  
with the other  
she holds the earthen pitcher  
—of the country earth—  
Scarcely sure  
those naked  
feet  
of the girl of Imerina.  
What can she be dreaming  
beneath her thick *lamba*  
which yet molds  
breasts half guessed, sharp  
smooth and pointed?  
—“What can you be dreaming  
Amber-skinned-one  
Almond-eyed-one?”—  
What can she be thinking  
she-who-has-never-known

nor joy nor sorrow  
nor love nor hate . . .  
Alluring yet  
those lying  
lips:  
so smooth and pointed?  
A breath,  
the breath of a breeze  
has so soon ruffled  
her black hair.  
What can she be dreaming  
this soul-less body  
which ruffles  
the soul of the poet?  
Sweet  
deceit.

*Translated from the French by Dorothy Blair*

*Amina*

Amina, the choice has fallen on you  
to go,  
Like a rose-bud you've shut, after  
you had blossomed,  
I pray for you a light leading you  
to heaven.  
The love that binds us together,  
none other can unbind.

I longed for your return to health,  
to this end I prayed.  
I wish you had not lost, succumbing  
to the ailment,  
God's own dictum that it shall be,  
the choice has been yours to go.  
The love that binds us together, none  
other can unbind.

My grief is past description, whenever  
I dwell on you,  
This and that memory come back, it's  
now but a dream,  
I believe not that death betokens the  
end of life.  
The love that binds us together,  
none other can unbind.

Imperishable, I believe, is the soul,  
forever will it live,  
Death is a salvation, come when it  
comes,  
My beloved precious, in Heaven thou  
shalt dwell.

The love that binds us together,  
none other can unbind.

One thing for certain I know and  
remember,

You now dwell, where distress will  
touch you not again,

That is recompense for me left  
now behind.

The love that binds us together,  
none other can unbind.

The poem concludes with a prayer  
to you,

When dust and dust reunite and the  
soul returneth,

And death is no more, love shall be  
reborn,

The love that binds us together,  
none other can unbind.

## *Remember*

It's neither yours nor mine,  
    all these are to be shared.  
I'm yours, you mine, what's there  
    to divide?  
Coming together for mortals, that's  
    the thing to do,  
In God's eyes it is pleasing,  
    and so with His angels.  
To tell you I am going away,  
    that I dare not say,  
Neither you my companion, I think not  
    that's what you want,  
To say "no" is bitter to you, and  
    so it is to me.  
The world is full of complications,  
    that's what I say to you,  
    remember.

*The Witch Tree at Mubende*

The Witch Tree  
old and knobbly  
stood with years  
scratched by a cross  
abused  
as cameras clicked  
and learned tongues discoursed.

Naked it stood  
in its age of mysteries.

Beauty and innocence  
stood there too  
side by side—  
two witches  
as I saw them  
prismatic lenses prying  
the old and the new—

To me she was then  
the Mubende Witch Tree.

*An African Vigil*

Evening drapes gold on distant hills  
as slowly along the winding footpath  
I walk to meet her  
my dark lady.

She will be at the waterhole  
drawing the day's last pot of water.  
As I turn round these familiar bushes  
my heart knows she will be there  
as it has been  
since first we kept vigil.

I stand and wait—  
First appears her pot  
then bare brown shoulders  
a slender neck  
fringed with round beads  
of a fiery sunset glow,  
a slow turn of dark eyes  
a lightning shadow of a smile—

That is all she ever says  
that is all I wish to hear.  
She steps aside to let me pass.  
As I edge my way past her,  
her eyes meet my eyes  
    for a moment  
    that lingers timelessly  
    dwelling on each other understandingly

Same time tomorrow? my eyes say,  
hers: I shall not fail.

## *The Prostitute*

I desired her  
truly, like all men  
in the dark cascades  
of the Suzana desire beautiful  
and seductive women;  
the Congo beat  
rippled through her  
shimmering  
along a bottom  
down to her feet.

The morning of the night  
burst through my thighs  
in a longing of fire—  
she  
almost a goddess  
lit  
in clever cascades  
of light.  
But in the light of another morning,  
after the jingle of pennies,  
how could I move  
to stir the glue-pot?

*Love*

I have often loved you, you  
With the sweet grace of a giraffe.  
My heart's room gathers warmth  
From your firewood-presence.  
You have been my pillar;  
Erect stem to lean my trust.  
You have been my *bentenki* tree,  
And I, the elephant, leaning  
On your back.

But now it seems  
You feed on my blemishes.  
You see, love needs a new skin,  
A new talk. Otherwise, love finds  
Comfort in petty faults.

You stand now under the sun;  
Your eyes collect nightmares  
From the sight of me.  
You grin the mixed smile  
Of a hyena. You smile,  
When you mean the opposite.  
You laugh, when you mean  
A spear should be thrust  
Into my heart.

But you still remind me  
Of those days in Brikama,\*  
When you were a young girl  
With some dandruff in your hair,  
Those days when you were you,  
Not some magazine photo model;

When success had not carved  
A musky pride in your head.

You see, it seems  
Time trims the genuine  
Out of love  
If the two bean-lobes  
Of love  
Are not careful.

You stand there, sullen  
As the sky before a rain.  
Root of my heart, I want you  
To rain happiness  
And drift to that old earth  
Where the old self dwells  
In the naked love of giraffes.

I want you to wear those waist beads  
And move with the tender waist-shake  
Of a *laubeh*.\*\* I want you to come,  
Perfuming the air with *gonga*.

For I do not care  
How much money you make now,  
Or the type of prestige-car you drive;  
Our love has never been  
About benzes or jaguars.  
I do not care about  
How many cities you travel to,  
Or men you put in their place;  
Our love has never been  
About your success against mine.

All I know is that  
Our love has been about love,

The sweet, earth-goddess love  
Of tubers. And about  
Our children and  
The seeds they should gather  
To plant trees of the future.

And if things should intervene,  
They should only be treated as things.  
And love should still be love,  
And make-ups still make-ups,  
Before we lose ourselves  
In this mad harvest of city lights.

\* Brikama: a town situated about sixteen miles from Banjul, Gambia.

\*\* *laube*: a member of the lower caste of the Fulani ethnic group found in Senegal and Gambia known for their seductiveness and sexual prowess.

## *Woman*

for F. Haidara

You have my unqualified love.  
Flowers lean on the slender waist  
Of your door knob. This is no  
Hoary love; no love to toss  
In the waste-basket.

I see you in my mirror every day,  
Love images in plenitude.  
You extend your lips  
In syllables of charm;  
I extend mine. Like elephants,  
We fuse our proboscises  
In the amorous moonlight.

Woman, there is nothing  
On this garrulous earth;  
Nothing, not even garlands  
On the feet of sacred stone circles  
That match your grace.

The way you walk, terraces of flower-shades.  
Each step practised to the  
Rhythm of the imaginary drum.  
Each waist-shake, each hand movement,  
Like the flawless gestures of a ballet-dancer.

Woman, tall beauty of giraffe-grace,  
Like the slender palm trees of Jeswang,\*  
Like the ostrich I saw at Niokoloba.  
You compete with the beams of sun and moon.  
And you trap shades of beauty  
Under your armpit.

Woman, you are Timbuktu.  
Salt rides every part of your aura.  
You nibble books like fish do plankton.  
You anchor your head  
On the rock of tradition.

You are beauty, clothed in kindness.  
Your days are filled with *terranga*.\*\*  
Woman, you are the nectar that perfumes my seasons.  
And I stand here today like a bard-flower,  
Your beauty overwhelming my savage days.

\* Jeswang: a town between Banjul and Serre Kunda, Gambia.

\*\* *terranga*: Senegambian hospitality.

**Léopold Sédar Senghor (Senegal)**

*You Held the Black Face*

[for Khalam]

You held the black face of the warrior between your hands  
Which seemed with fateful twilight luminous.  
From the hill I watched the sunset in the bays of your eyes.  
When shall I see my land again, the pure horizon of your face?  
When shall I sit at the table of your dark breasts?  
The nest of sweet decisions lies in the shade.  
I shall see different skies and different eyes,  
And shall drink from the sources of other lips, fresher than lemons,  
I shall sleep under the roofs of other hair, protected from storms.  
But every year, when the rum of spring kindles the veins afresh,  
I shall mourn anew my home, and the rain of your eyes over the  
thirsty savannah.

*Translated from the French by Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier*

## *I Will Pronounce Your Name*

[for Tama]

I will pronounce your name, Naëtt, I will declaim you, Naëtt!  
Naëtt, your name is mild like cinnamon, it is the fragrance in which  
the lemon grove sleeps,  
Naëtt, your name is the sugared clarity of blooming coffee trees  
And it resembles the savannah, that blossoms forth under the  
masculine ardor of the midday sun.  
Name of dew, fresher than shadows of tamarind,  
Fresher even than the short dusk, when the heat of the day is  
silenced.  
Naëtt, that is the dry tornado, the hard clap of lightning  
Naëtt, coin of gold, shining coal, you my night, my sun! . . .  
I am your hero, and now I have become your sorcerer, in order to  
pronounce your names.  
Princess of Elissa, banished from the Futa on that fateful day.

*Translated from the French by Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier*

## *I Have Spun a Song Soft*

[for Two Flutes]

I have spun a song soft as a murmur of doves at  
noon  
To the shrill notes of my four-string khalam.  
I have woven you a song and you did not hear me.  
I have offered you wild flowers with scents as strange  
as a sorcerer's eyes  
I have offered you my wild flowers. Will you let  
them wither,  
Finding distraction in the mayflies dancing?

*Translated from the French by John Reed and Clive Wake*

*A Hand of Light Caressed My Eyelids*

[for flutes]

A hand of light has caressed my eyelids of darkness  
And your smile rose like the sun on the mists drifting grey  
and cold over my Congo.  
My heart has echoed the virgin song of the  
dawn-birds  
As my blood kept time once to the white song of the  
sap in the branches of my arms.  
See, the bush flower and the star in my hair, and the band  
round the forehead of the herdsman athlete.  
I will take the flute, I will make a rhythm for the slow peace  
of the herds  
And all day sitting in the shade of your eyelashes, close to the  
Fountain of Fimla,  
I shall faithfully pasture the flaxen lowings of your herds,  
For this morning a hand of light caressed my eyelids of darkness  
And all day long my heart has echoed the virgin song of the  
birds.

*Translated from the French by John Reed and Clive Wake*

*Was It a Mograbin Night?*

[for two flutes and a distant drum]

Was it a Mograbin night? I leave Mogador with its platinum  
daughters.

Was it a Mograbin night? It was also the Night our night of  
Joal

Before we were born, inexpressible night: you did up your hair  
in the mirror of my eyes.

We sat anxiously in the shadow of our secret  
Anxiously waiting and your nostrils quivered.  
Do you remember that noise of peace? from the lower town,  
wave upon wave  
Till it was breaking at our feet. In the distance a lighthouse  
called to my right  
To my left, next to my heart, the strange immobility of your  
eyes.

These sudden flashes of lightning in the night of the rainy  
season—I could read your face  
And I took long parched draughts of your terrible face and  
they inflamed my thirst  
And in my astonished heart in my heart of silence in my  
nonplussed heart  
Those gusts of barking down there that burst it like a grenade.  
Then the bronze crunch of sand, the leaves flickered like eyelids.  
The black guards passed by, giant gods of Eden: moon-faced  
moths  
Rested gently on their arms—their happiness scalded us.

Listening to our hearts, we heard them beating down there at  
Fadioult  
We heard the earth tremble under the conquering feet of the  
athletes

And the voice of the Beloved singing the shadowy splendor  
of the Lover.

And we dared not move our trembling hands, and our mouths  
opened and closed.

And if the eagle suddenly flung itself at our breast, with a  
comet's fierce cry?

But the irresistible current carried me away towards the  
horrible song of the reefs of your eyes.

There will be other nights my dear. You will come again to sit  
in this bank of shadow

You will always be the same and you will not be the same.

Does it matter? Through all your transformations, I shall  
worship the features of Koumba Tam.

*Translated from the French by John Reed and Clive Wake*

*I Came with You as Far as the Village*

[for Khalam]

I came with you as far as the village of grain-huts, to the gates  
of Night  
I had no words before the golden riddle of your smile.  
A brief twilight fell on your face, freak of the divine fancy.  
From the top of the hill where the light takes refuge, I saw the  
brightness of your cloth go out  
And your crest like a sun dropped beneath the shadow of the  
ricefields  
When anxieties came against me, ancestral fears  
more treacherous than panthers  
—The mind cannot push them back across the day's horizons.  
Is it then night for ever, parting never to meet again?  
I shall weep in the darkness, in the motherly hollow of the Earth  
I will sleep in the silence of my tears  
Until my forehead is touched by the milky dawning of your  
mouth.

*Translated from the French by John Reed and Clive Wake*

*Breaths of Saffron on Broken Mirrors*

Lust won't leave me alone  
Confused and wanting you  
Bathed in juicy colors  
As we fall on each other  
And I bathe like a hero  
In your body full of desire . . .  
But it's me hissing  
And a little water  
Before I'm feeling guilty  
Until I see these notes  
Echoing outside and not unnatural  
But as joy with passion  
And turning me upside down,  
Oblivious to any niceties  
Of the thin water of reason.  
I remember love again,  
A time to write poetry  
Without carving it on my forehead,  
When I shun both sides of the river  
To look in the mirror of its flowing.  
I see love born amidst three stories:  
Oleander covering my face;  
Writing I see on the feet  
Of some poor farmers walking by;  
And how the peace we found in trees  
Filled us so deeply  
That we discovered the power of revolution.  
Can you imagine my fascination  
When birdsong attacked a meadow  
That bloomed only for my eyes  
Before my own tongue took over  
Prophesying a newborn amidst the sheaves

Of wheat in the gleam of harvest?  
And why this chant sulking in the cypress  
Before tumbling through the branches  
And overpowering a man  
Known as a lily in the field?  
Like henna lines we surrounded him  
Before a dream vision  
Of strong language like radiation  
Repelling love in action  
Required a heart-to-heart conversation.  
Before I was so angry  
I was smoother than a lentil  
And full of nurture overflowing  
For a thousand wounded,  
Another thousand dead,  
And one particular woman  
Passing away forever to that far shore  
Between my wanting and leaving her.  
Listen. From now on,  
Never will I waste another day,  
Never, even if I have no poetry,  
Even if I reject every single word,  
Never again will I waste a single day—  
At least not as long as I love  
To see her smile so clearly  
And find her body's wild curves  
In the waves crashing to shore  
For a song of our martyrs' remains.

*Translated from the Arabic by Charles Cantalupo with Ghirmai Negash*

*Abeba*

Abeba, my flower from Asmara . . .

Measured and subtle  
As her makeup  
And her finely drawn eyes—  
She spoke like poetry.

The food her family sent  
To prison everyday  
Arrived as usual  
The day her grave was dug.  
I heard her cry.

Later that night I also heard  
The prison guard  
Summon her out  
And the shot.

She lives in my dreams  
And refuses to leave,  
Knowing all my secrets  
And never letting me rest.

Before she died  
She wove a basket  
Inscribed “for my parents”

Abeba, my flower from Asmara . . .  
Who never blossomed.  
My cell-mate.

*Translated from Tigrinya by Charles Cantalupo with Ghirmai Negash*

*What abou' de Lô?*

Diana was a white girl  
Martin was a black boy

they fell in love  
they fell in love  
they fell in love

Said Diana's folks  
What abou' de Lô  
Said Martin's folks  
What abou' de Lô  
said everyone's folks  
What abou' de Lô

Said Diana, said Martin  
What Lô?  
God's Lô  
man's Lô  
devil's Lô  
what Lô

But the folks just said  
de Lô  
de Lô  
de Lô  
de Lô  
what abou' de Lô  
what abou' de Lô

Diana was a white girl  
Martin was a black boy

they go to jail  
they go to jail  
they go to jail

Said Diana's folks  
See, we told you mos  
Said Martin's folks  
See, we told you mos  
said everyone's folks  
see, we told you mos

Said Diana, said Martin  
what you tell  
what God tell  
what man tell  
what devil tell  
what you tell?

But the folks just said  
de Lô  
de Lô  
de Lô  
de Lô  
what abou' de Lô, huh  
what abou' de Lô?

Diana was a white girl  
Martin was a black boy

Diana commit suicide  
Martin commit suicide  
Diana and Martin commit suicide

Say Diana's folks  
O God protect  
Say Martin's folks

O God protect  
Say everyone's folks  
O God protect

Diana and Martin they died for de Lô  
God's Lô  
man's Lô  
devil's Lô  
what Lô?

And the folks just said  
de Lô  
de Lô  
de Lô  
de Lô  
What abou' de Lô  
What abou' de Lô?

*Umamina*

Come Mamina,  
Come let us stretch our legs and thither go,  
There where it is wilderness  
There where water fountains spring  
Dampening the deep green rocks,  
Slippery with slimy moss.

Nay Mamina,  
Come out as though to draw water,  
Carry a calabash and descend to the river.  
There you will find me under the water-myrtle  
Heavy in full bloom,  
Black and oozing with thick juice.

Come Mamina,  
Alone, you are bright with crimson hue,  
Your path adorned with gaudy colors,  
Blossoming with flowers,  
Which stoop before you  
Bowing their heads on the earth.

Come Mamina,  
When you did gaze on me, ebony maiden,  
I knew not whither I would go,  
My knees quivered, my weapons dropped,  
I was filled with the bitterness that lurks in the heart  
Like a wild beast, and is called love.

Alas, I seek you, Mamina,  
You have hidden in the fields of dry grass.  
The dry grass is my soul,  
Yet you are loitering there,  
Gathering blackberries, herbs and creepers.

It is not the national song of shields and knobkerries I sing.  
In truth I chant in harmony with the music of your reed-pipe,  
Whose tunes I hear in the land of Chaka.  
I heard and listened and knew.  
I beheld your dark complexioned lips  
Close over the singing reed-pipe,  
Which recalls the golden-rumped canary of the forest.  
I would that it were blown by the heart  
Which harbors thought and feeling.  
You have made me grow thus with love,  
That I no more appear as a Zulu  
Within the courtyard of the black people.

Your love and mine, O Mamina,  
Excel the mind, beyond the power of the diviners,  
Whose magic bones are strewn on the ground.  
They grind herbs and poisonous bushes.  
“In truth, are you not deceiving me, Mamina?”  
I ask you, as I gaze into  
The center of your eyes without blinking:  
“Are you not one of the ancestral spirits?”  
Perchance you have lost your way,  
On your journey to the gates of Heaven,  
And have branched off to Earth,  
And chanced on the roots of love.

Come Mamina,  
You are the star of my soul  
You alone are in the depth of my veins  
Which make my heart tremble.  
You are like the track of the field rat  
Which winds through old grass and heads far off.

Come Mamina,  
I feel loneliness steal over me.  
This earth affords no refuge for me.

Come and lead me to your land, Mamina.  
There let us solve the mystery of this love,  
That I may know it, Mamina;  
Know it wholly with the spirit of the ancestors.

*Translated from the Zulu by R. M. Mfeka and adapted by Peggy Rutherford*

*Nyanken Hne*

My husband, Nyanken Hne,  
like *galo*, waving up Dolokeh's hills.  
The storms cannot touch him;  
they fear him like a wife fears a jealous man.  
The young girls with their shining eyes,  
whose lashes wave, stand off the road  
when Nyanken Hne passes.  
Their pails of water fall off their heads  
to see Nyanken Hne pass by.

My husband, Nyanken Hne,  
who came amidst polished smiles, long,  
dark, chalked faces, bowing when he passes.  
Nyanken came, dancing my way,  
in a war dance, shining like ebony.  
How I love to look at him dancing  
to giant drums beating in the dusky wind.  
How Nyanken passed them all by  
while they called him with swinging  
oiled, brown arms, dancing.  
But Nyanken chose only me.

Nyanken has said I am the only one.  
He has broken taboos, has shattered  
their good dreams.  
All these years, Nyanken has said, no,  
I am the only one.  
When I rise, Nyanken is there,  
like the mighty, rising *Sebo*.  
Unlike our townsmen whose eyes  
never quit hunting, Nyanken has only me.  
When I sit, he looks down into my eyes,  
and they all stand and stare.

## *Surrender*

So often, I want to make you;  
roll you, reshape you, a ball of clay  
after my say.  
I want to squeeze you,  
my play dough, an image,  
into my image.  
I want to melt you, shape you, like gold;  
polish you, mold you into a charm  
to be sold.

My little woodwork, carve you,  
make you my *Kissi* ritual mask.  
I want to hang you  
so often, around these, my walls,  
make you my little talisman,  
swing you, my little magic wand.

My pungent, leafy *voodoo*,  
my *sumu*, my boiling pot of *juju*.  
My little protective pin  
about my fabric life, about my pieces.  
I want to ride you, my cruising Pajaro.  
Suddenly, there  
you are, always God.

Now, it is your turn. Here, roll me,  
reshape me, pat me, mold me,  
heating the clay of my flesh,  
after your flesh.

Grip hold of my mascara cheeks, my charms  
of gold bracelets, binding my life.  
Melt all my magic wands,  
my bulging, voodoo eyes.

Take hold of my big, bleeding heart,  
my boiling pot of *juju*, my beads  
of charms, my me.  
And if I'm not yet surrendered,  
my God, vanquish me.

*Loving This Younger Woman*

is like holding in the palm  
a pearl of inscrutable price, a moon  
of impenetrable charm.

My whetstone, my bright  
onyx! When will she strike fire  
out of this demure light?

I long for pride, or anger,  
for the violence of trust, a more  
than ordinary hunger:

like the moon, she is so  
mannered, angelic in her taught  
orbit, her magnesium glow

in independent space  
presenting to this flinty earth  
the one unblemished face.

And even as my hands ape  
a reconstructed youth, and reach  
to touch her shadowed nape,

a gravity intervenes,  
her brilliant innocence gulfs  
again outdistancing the dreams.

*Loving This Older Woman*

is like walking on the thin  
surface of the moon, the skull  
too close beneath the skin.

Why do I so youthfully embrace  
death, kiss the seismic troubles  
that have mapped her face,

courting its reliable eclipse?  
Her breasts fill my palms like gourds  
of forming cheese, her lips

carouse and part, obedient  
to suggestion as a girl's. But  
there's the end, apparent

as a birthmark, etched  
in acid, the pocked and empty sea,  
unflinching as a ghost.

She is so luminous and worn,  
her dusty smile, tough wisdom, hope,  
and the flesh loosened on the bone.

No use pretending to mark  
time: time wrinkles at the wrist,  
the moon's lid shuts in the dark.

## *Ending It*

It is too early to be sitting outside.  
The garden is blue with dissolution.

But we sit here, in glacial air, until  
her glance throws scalding loops around my shoulders.

“Can’t you at least *try* to explain?” she  
manages to say; I cannot bring myself

to answer, *You are not the woman with whom*  
*I wish to grow old.* I hug my withdrawal

to my chest like a punctured ball.  
“This doesn’t make either of us bad,” I demur.

Silence, heavy as benches. In time, it lightens,  
doves whinny, we almost laugh at the quizzical hens.

At last: “The dew is so beautiful.” Dewdrops  
on her cheeks, falling faster than stars.

And: “I wonder where *he’s* going”: an ant,  
hefting his penance through tremendous grass.

Simultaneously, separately, gratefully, we  
lift our faces to the warmth of the permanent sun.

*Credits*  
*Contributors*



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## Contributors

**Abderrahim Afarki** was born in 1956 in Khemisset, Morocco. In 1976, as a high school student, he was arrested for his membership in a banned organization and subsequently condemned to a ten-year prison sentence in the notorious Kenitra Central Prison. Following his release in 1987, he worked for a few years in Fes, but police harassment and surveillance forced him into exile. He was granted political refugee status in France, and he is now a French citizen, working as a librarian at the University of Paris-Sorbonne.

**Mririda n'Aït Attik** was born in Megdaz, a Berber village in the beautiful Tass-aout valley of the Atlas Mountains of Morocco. Dubbed the Moroccan Sappho, she was famous during World War II as a courtesan-poet-singer in the *souk* of Azilal, Morocco. Her songs, composed in the Berber dialect of *tachel-hait* and based on oral traditions, were collected and translated into French by René Euloge, a French soldier who had frequented Mririda's house. After the war, she vanished from Azilal and was never heard from again. Daniel Halpern, with the help of Paula Paley, translated *The Songs of Mririda* (1974). Some of these song-poems have appeared in *The Other Voice: Twentieth-Century Women's Poetry in Translation* (1976), *Women Poets of the World* (1983), and *The Penguin Book of Women Poets* (1986).

**Lounis Aït-Menguellet** was born in 1950 at Aït-Badrar in Ighil Bouammas in the Djurdjura Mountains, Algeria, and is perhaps the best-known Kabyle poet/singer.

Among his early songs centered on love are “Thalt Ayam” and “Tayri.” The most dynamic singer in his home area, he has become a symbol for Kabyle cultural nationalism. His poems, composed in his native Tamazight language, have been published in English translation in the *Literary Review*.

**Ifi Amadiume** was born in 1947 in Nigeria, where she received her early education before she went to study in England. A full professor in the Department of Religion at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, she has also made a significant mark on African poetry. One of the most gifted and eloquent African women poets, her poetry books include *Passion Waves* (1985), *Ecstasy* (1995), *Circles of Love* (2006), and *Voices Draped in Black* (2007). Her poems have been published in numerous anthologies, including *The Heinemann Book of African Women's Poetry* (1995).

**Kofi Awoonor** was born in 1935 in Wheta, Ghana. Poet, university professor, and diplomat, Awoonor is among the most important African literary artists. His works include the volumes of poetry *Rediscovery* (1964), *Night of My Blood* (1971), *Come Back Ghana* (1972), *Ride Me, Memory* (1973), *South of the Sahara* (1975), *The House by the Sea* (1978), *Until the Morning After* (1987), and *Comes the Voyager at Last* (1992); translations of Ewe oral poetry, *Guardians of the Scared Word* (1974); a novel, *This Earth, My Brother* (1972); and a book of essays, *The Breast of the Earth: A Survey of the History, Culture and Literature South of the Sahara* (1976). Former Ghanaian ambassador to Cuba, Brazil, and the United Nations and minister of state in the government of Ghana, he is currently Writer in Residence at the University of Ghana, Legon.

**Gabeba Baderoon** was born in 1969 in Cape Town, South Africa, and grew up in Crawford, Athlone. She attended Livingstone High School in Claremont before entering the University of Cape Town, where she earned her Ph.D. in English. She also studied creative writing at Sheffield Hallam University in England and at Pennsylvania State University. Baderoon's poetry has appeared in *New Contrast*, *Carapace*, *Chimurenga*, *Illuminations*, and many other journals. She received the DaimlerChrysler Award for South African Poetry (2004), and her winning volume was published as *Museum of Ordinary Life* (2005). Her other volumes of poetry are *The Dream in the Next Body* (2005) and *A Hundred Silences* (2006).

**Juma Bhalo** (also known as Ahmad Nassir Juma and Ahmad Nassir bin Juma Bhalo) was born in 1937 in Mombasa, Kenya, where he currently lives and acts as sustainer of the classical traditions of Swahili poetry. He attended the Arab Boys' School, later renamed the Arab Primary School, and was educated only up to Standard IV, the equivalent of middle school. During the 1960s, he lived in Malindi but later returned to live in Old Town (Muji wa Kale), Mombasa, where

he was employed as a sign painter at the docks. An accomplished calligrapher and painter, he is one of the most respected living Swahili poets.

**Syl Cheney-Coker**, a descendant of Creole freedmen who returned to Africa from the United States, was born Syl Cheney Coker (changing his name to its current form in 1970) in 1945 in Free Town, Sierra Leone. Poet, novelist, and journalist, he has spent a great deal of time in exile as a student in the United States. From 1966, he studied at the University of California, Los Angeles; the University of Oregon; and the University of Wisconsin–Madison. After a brief return to Sierra Leone, Cheney-Coker accepted a teaching position at the University of the Philippines, where he met his late wife, Dalisay. He has also taught at the University of Maiduguri in northern Nigeria and has been a Writer-in-Residence at the University of Iowa. His books include the poetry volumes *The Road to Jamaica* (1969), *Concerto for an Exile: Poems* (1973), *The Graveyard Also Has Teeth* (1980), and *The Blood in the Desert's Eyes: Poems* (1990) and the novel *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* (1990). He has also edited the *Vanguard*, a progressive newspaper, in Free Town, exposing himself to death threats serious enough to cause another spate of exile.

**Frank M. Chipasula**, whose roots spread over much of southern Africa, extending to ancient Timbuktu, Mali, was born in 1949. He earned his undergraduate degree from the University of Zambia before studying at Brown and Yale for his two master's degrees and a Ph.D. in English literature. He has edited several anthologies of African poetry, including *The Heinemann Book of African Women's Poetry* (1995, with his wife, Stella) and *When My Brothers Come Home: Poems from Central and Southern Africa* (1985), and published volumes of his own poetry, *Visions and Reflections* (1972), *O Earth, Wait for Me* (1984), *Nightwatcher*, *Nightsong* (1986), *Whispers in the Wings* (1991; rpt. 2007), and *On the Shoulders of the Mountain* (2007), a poetry CD. Several of his poems have been translated into French, Chinese, and Spanish. Currently a Judge William Holmes Cook Professor at Southern Illinois University, he lives in rural southern Illinois with his wife and daughter.

**Siriman Cissoko** was born in 1934 in Mali but lived in Senegal. He died in 2005 at the age of seventy-one. His book-length poem, *Ressac de nous-même: poèmes* (1967), an excerpt of which appears in this anthology, is a major poetic statement on love and self-affirmation by a second-generation Malian poet. His poetry, like Léopold Sédar Senghor's, evoking the music of the Kora, celebrates his double love of the black woman and the land in a very sensuous, original, and understatedly powerful language. His second book, *Le conte du pain rassis*, was published in 1972. A few of his poems have appeared in English in Wole Soyinka's anthology, *Poems of Black Africa* (1975), and in Spanish translation elsewhere.

**José Craveirinha**, recognized as Mozambique's greatest poet, was born in 1922 and died in 2003 in Maputo, where he worked first as a journalist for *O Brado Africano*, *Noticias*, and *Tribuna*. In 1966, he was arrested by the Portuguese colonial authorities and imprisoned in Machava, where he was subjected to constant torture for his participation in the African resistance movements. After Mozambique's independence from Portugal, he worked as a librarian at Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo. His many books of poetry include *Chigubo* (1964), *Karingana ua Karingana* (1974), *Cela I* (1980), and *Maria* (elegies for his wife, 1988). His poems appear in many anthologies of African poetry.

**David Diop** was born in 1927 in Bordeaux, France, to Senegalese and Cameroonian parents. He spent many years in poor health and was usually hospitalized, shuttling between France and Senegal. During one such trip, on August 25, 1960, he, then thirty-three; his wife, Virginie Kamara, whom he celebrates in his poem "Rama Kam"; and his second collection of poems perished off the coast of Dakar in a plane crash. The most powerful of the second generation of Negritude poets, Diop wrote an intensely erotic love poem for his wife. At his death, Diop left a single volume of his poems, *Coup de Pilon*, published in 1956. His poems appear in numerous anthologies of African poetry.

**Isobel Dixon** was born in 1969 in Umtata, Transkei, South Africa; grew up in the Karoo; and studied in Stellenbosch, South Africa, and Edinburgh, Scotland. Her poetry has been widely published in South Africa, where her collection *Weather Eye* (2001) won the Sanlam Prize (2000) and the Olive Schreiner Prize (2004). Internationally, her work has been published in the *Paris Review*, *Leviathan Quarterly*, *Wasafiri*, the *Guardian*, *London Magazine*, and the *Tall Lighthouse Review*, among others, and has been translated into German, Dutch, and Turkish. Her poems have also appeared on the Oxfam *Life Lines* CD, in the *Unfold* pamphlet (2002), and in the British Council *New Writing* anthologies. Her new collection, *A Fold in the Map* (2007), will appear in a South African edition from Jacana. She currently lives in Cambridge, works in London as a literary agent, and gives regular poetry readings.

**Emanuel Dongala** (Boundizeki) is a scientist, poet, and novelist who was born in 1941 in the Congo Republic. He was educated partly in the Congo and in France, where he studied the physical sciences. Upon his return to his country, he held important academic and administrative positions in the university until the civil war forced him and his family to flee to the United States with the assistance of such American and African writers as John Updike and Chinua Achebe. His poetry has been published in many international reviews and such anthologies as the *Nouvelle somme de poesie du monde noir*, edited by Paolin Joachim (1966), and Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier's *Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry* (1998).

His novel, *Un fusil dans la main, un poeme dans la poche*, was published in 1973. Since then, he has published *The Fire of Origins* (1987) and *Little Boys Are from the Stars* (1998). A holder of two doctoral degrees in the sciences, Dongala teaches at Simons Rock College of Bard College in Massachusetts.

**Reesom Haile** was born in 1946 in Eritrea and died in 2003. Regarded as Eritrea's poet laureate, he returned to that country in 1994 after a twenty-year exile that included teaching communications at the New School for Social Research and serving as development communications consultant for U.N. agencies, international nongovernmental organizations, and foreign governments. Committed to his mother tongue, Tigrinya, he published *Waza ms Qum Neger nTensae Hager* (1997), which won the 1998 Raimok Prize, Eritrea's highest literary award. His second volume of poems in Tigrinya is *Bahlña Bahlbana*. His other books of poetry include *We Have Our Voice: Selected Poems of Reesom Haile* (2000) and *We Invented the Wheel* (2002). His work has been translated into ten languages.

**Beyene Hailemariam** was born in 1955 in Eritrea. Educated in Italy, he holds a master's degree in sociology. During his nine years of incarceration in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, he wrote some of the poems, including "Silas" and "Let's Divorce and Get Married Again," that were first published in 2000. His work appears in *Who Needs a Story? Contemporary Eritrean Poetry in Tigrinya, Tigre and Arabic*, edited by Charles Cantalupo and Ghirmai Negash (2005).

**Naana Banyiwa Horne** was born in 1949 in Kumasi, Ghana. She obtained a B.A. (Honors) in English and education from the University of Cape Coast in Ghana, an M.A. in English from the University of Florida, Gainesville, and a Ph.D. in African languages and literature from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She taught at Indiana University, Kokomo, before moving to Santa Fe Community College, Gainesville, where she is currently an associate professor of English. She lives in Gainesville with her three children. An active scholar, teacher, and literary critic, she has contributed to major publications on African literature. Her poems have appeared in *Asili: The Journal of Multicultural Heartspeak*, *Santa Fe Review*, *Obsidian II: Black Literature in Review*, *The New African Poetry: An Anthology*, and her own volumes, *Sunkwa: Clings onto Life* (1999) and *Sunkwa Revisited* (2007).

**Ahmad Basheikh Husein** was born in 1909 in Mombasa, Kenya, where he died in 1961. He was the greatest poet of Mombasa after the great Muyaka, though his poetry was never published during his lifetime. However, Husein recited his poems to his nephew, poet Juma Bhalo, who committed them to memory and transcribed them. Jan Knappert has preserved Husein's love songs in *Four Centuries of Swahili Verse: A Literary History and Anthology* (1979).

**Rashidah Ismaili** was born in 1941 in Cotonou, Benin. First educated in a Quranic school developed and headed by her maternal grandmother, she went to France and Italy to elude her Nigerian father's attempt to marry her off. She subsequently chose her own husband, from whom she is divorced. She holds a B.A. in music (voice) from the New York College of Music and an M.A. in social psychology and a Ph.D. in psychology from the New School for Social Research in New York. She is a retired professor after years of teaching at Rutgers University in New Jersey. Her books of poetry include *Oniybo and Other Poems* (1985), *Missing in Action and Presumed Dead* (1992), and *Cantata for Jimmy* (2003). Ismaili lives in Harlem, where she also has a salon-gallery that showcases writers and visual artists of color.

**António Jacinto** (do Amaral Martins) was born in 1924 in Luanda, Angola, and died there in 1991. He was active in the cultural movements that led to the formation of the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA). He fought on the eastern front and served in the government of independent Angola under António Agostinho Neto. His poems have appeared in Mario Pinto de Andrade's anthologies, *When Bullets Begin to Flower* (1972), *No Reino de Caliban* (1975), *When My Brothers Come Home: Poems from Central and Southern Africa* (1985), and in his own volumes, *Poemas* (1961), *Outra vez Vovo Bartolomeu* (1979), and *Sobreviver em Tarrafal de Santiago* (1985), a poetic record of his fourteen-year experience in Tarrafal Prison.

**David Kerr** was born in 1942 in Carlisle, England, but has lived in southern Africa for much of his adult life, mainly in Malawi. He was educated in Newcastle upon Tyne, London, and obtained his Ph.D. from the University of Budapest, Hungary. A founding member of the Writers Group at Chancellor College, University of Malawi, where he taught for many years, his literary publications include a poetry chapbook, *Firstprint* (1968); *Tangled Tongues* (2003) and single poems; and short science fiction in anthologies and journals. Currently a professor at the University of Botswana, he has also taught at the universities of Malawi and Zambia. He has dedicated his life to rural community development through traveling theater.

**Saba Kidane** was born in 1978. Poet, performer, and journalist as well as presenter and coordinator of broadcasts on Eritrean television and radio, she also writes for newspapers. Her provocative poem "Go Crazy Over Me" resonates with the audacious and erotic poems of Mririda, the Berber courtesan poet from Morocco. Her work has been included in Charles Cantalupo and Ghirmay Negash's anthology *Who Needs a Story? Contemporary Eritrean Poetry in Tigrinya, Tigre and Arabic* (2005).

**Daniel P. Kunene** was born in 1923 at Edenville, Orange Free State, in South Africa. He obtained his B.A. in African languages and linguistics from the University of South Africa in 1949, later earning both his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Cape Town, where he began his long academic career, lecturing in Bantu languages. In 1999 he was awarded the honorary degree of D. Litt. et. Phil. by his alma mater, the University of South Africa. In exile since 1963, he has taught in many African and American universities, including the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where he is professor emeritus. A staunch advocate of African-language literatures whose own poetry is deeply rooted in his native Sesotho folk literary tradition, he has translated Sesotho literature into English, and developed new approaches to the study of Africa's indigenous literatures. He not only undertook a translation of Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* but also published two important studies on that Mosotho writer: *The Works of Thomas Mofolo: Summaries and Critiques* (1967) and *Thomas Mofolo and the Emergence of Written Sesotho Prose* (1989). A fine poet with a great sense of humor, Kunene's volumes of poetry include *Pirates Have Become Our Kings* (1978) and *A Seed Must Seem to Die* (1981), a monument to the 1976 Soweto Uprising. His hardhitting and witty stories have been collected in a volume entitled *From the Pit of Hell to the Spring of Life* (1986). Though he currently lives and writes in Madison, he actively travels and lectures.

**Liyongo Fumo**, whose name in translation means "Earth Spear," was a Swahili national hero who is reputed to have lived in Shaga or Shanga between 1580 and 1690. Liyongo is accredited with the invention of the *gungu* dance songs still performed at weddings and of trochaic meter, which liberated Swahili poetry from the "restrained rhythm of the religious hymns," as Jan Knappert asserts.

**Lindiwe Mabuza** was born in 1938 in Newcastle, Natal Province, South Africa. She obtained a B.A. from the University of Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland, Roma, an M.A. in American studies from the University of Minnesota, and another in literature from Stanford University. She has taught at Ohio University and at the University of Minnesota. She served as an ANC representative in Europe and Zambia during the struggle for South Africa's freedom. Active in the women's movement, she coedited an anthology, *Malibongwe: ANC Women: Poetry Is Also Their Weapon*, in 1978. Selections of her poems have appeared in Anta Sudan Katara Mberi and Cosmo Pierterse's anthology *Speak Easy, Speak Free* (1977), Barry Feinberg's anthology *Poets to the People: South African Freedom Poems* (1974; expanded ed. 1980), and *The Heinemann Book of African Women's Poetry* (1995). Her collections of poetry include *Letter to Letta* (1991), *Voices That Lead: Poems, 1976–1996* (1998), and *Footprints and Fingerprints* (2008). After having served in the same capacity in Malaysia and the Philippines, she is currently South Africa's High Commissioner to the United Kingdom.

**Kristina Masuwa-Morgan** (also Kristina Rungano) was born in 1963 in Harare, but she grew up in Kuatama, Zimbabwe, where she received her early education. She holds a Ph.D. in business information technology systems and is currently senior lecturer and director of the Business Information Management program at the Canterbury Christ Church University in Kent. The first and best published Zimbabwean woman poet, her books include *A Storm Is Brewing* (1984) and *To Seek a Reprieve and Other Poems* (2004). Individual poems have appeared in *Daughters of Africa* (1992), *The Heinemann Book of African Women's Poetry* (1995), *Uncommon Wealth: An Anthology of Poetry in English* (1998), *The Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry* (1998), and *Step into a World: A Global Anthology of the New Black Literature* (2000), as well as in journals.

**Makhokolotso K. A. Mokhomomo** became the first published Mosotho woman poet when her first book of poems, *Sebatatso*, came out in 1958, although it had been ready by 1953. "When He Spoke to Me of Love," extracted from a long poem, "Muratuwa—Lerato la me," first appeared in *The Penguin Book of South African Verse* (1968).

**Lupenga Mphande** was born in 1947 in Thoza Village, Malawi. He was educated at the universities of Malawi, Lancaster, and Texas–Austin, where he obtained his Ph. D. in linguistics. One of Malawi's leading poets and founders of the Malawi Writers Group at the University of Malawi, he has published *A Crackle at Midnight* (1998), his first volume of poems. He has also contributed to such international poetry anthologies as *When My Brothers Come Home: Poems from Central and Southern Africa* (1985) and *The Heinemann Book of African Poetry in English* (1991) and to *Allusions*, *The Gar*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Poetry International*, *Poetry Review*, *West Africa*, and other journals. A tenured associate professor in the Department of African and African American Studies at Ohio State University, Columbus, he lives with his family outside of Columbus.

**Muyaka bin Haji** (al Ghassaniy), the most prominent early-nineteenth-century Swahili poet, who is often simply referred to as Muyaka, was born in Mombasa, Kenya, in 1776 and died in 1837. He frequently employed double-edged metaphors in his lyrical and satirical poetry, thus making it among the most complex and rich in Swahili poetry. Considered the greatest Swahili poet, Muyaka is the originator of the secular poetic tradition in Swahili. Muyaka ("handsome") was a shrewd businessman who owned several ships and made his fortune in the maritime trade.

**Mvula ya Nangolo**, descendant of King Nangolo, was born in 1943 in Oniimwandi Village, Uukwambi District, in northern Namibia. An accomplished journalist, he worked for two major radio stations in Central Europe, helped to launch *The Namibian Hour* on Radio Tanzania, Dar es Salaam, and later was employed as

commentator, producer, and news reader for Radio Zambia in Lusaka. He also worked for the Department of Information and Publicity while editing *Namibia-Today*, the official organ of the South West People's Organization (SWAPO) in Lusaka. The first Namibian poet to write in English, his poetry volumes include *From Exile* (1976), *Thoughts from Exile* (1991), and *Watering the Beloved Desert* (2008). Individual poems have appeared in the anthologies *When My Brothers Come Home: Poems from Central and Southern Africa* (1985) and *The Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry* (1998). Highly esteemed as Namibia's national poet, he is currently special advisor to the Minister of Information and Communication Technology in Windhoek, Namibia.

**António Agostinho Neto** was born in 1922 in Kaxikane Village, Catete District, in the Icolo e Bengo region, about forty miles from Luanda, Angola. He studied medicine in Lisbon and Coimbra. On graduation day, he married Maria Eugenia, whom he met at university, and returned home to Angola to practice medicine. His election as president of the MPLA, the main anti-colonial movement in Angola, exposed him to Portuguese police brutality, humiliation, and imprisonment. Undaunted, he escaped from prison in Portugal and returned to lead the armed liberation struggle for Angola's independence from Portugal, becoming the new nation's first president in 1976. Although he wrote protest poems during the liberation struggle, he also left a few love poems that he wrote to Maria Eugenia from various political prisons. His poems are collected in *Sacred Hope* (1974), his sole book of poems, and he is internationally renowned as one of the most important Lusophone African poets. In 1979, Neto died in a Moscow hospital, after a prolonged illness.

**Gabriel Okara** was born in 1921 in Bumoundi, River Nun, the Niger Delta region in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Okara's poems were published as *The Fisherman's Invocation* (1978), co-winner of the 1979 Commonwealth Poetry Prize, which—along with his novel, *The Voice* (1964)—marked him as one of the most linguistically innovative English-language African writers. The loss of the veteran Nigerian poet's manuscripts during the Biafran War remains a great tragedy to African literature.

**Mohammed Said Osman** was born in 1967. Poet and journalist, he heads the Program Development Unit for Educational Mass Media at the Ministry of Education in Eritrea. Winner of the 1995 Raimok Prize for Tigre literature, he wrote the poem "Juket" in 2000 and published *Atrafie Wo Neweshi*, a children's book in Tigre, in 2003.

**Niyi Osundare** was born in 1947 in Ikere-Ekiti, Nigeria. He holds a B.A. (Honors) from the University of Ibadan, an M.A. from Leeds University, and a Ph.D. from York University in Canada. Among his many books of poetry are *Songs of the*

*Marketplace* (1983); *Village Voices* (1984); *The Eye of the Earth* (1986), winner of the Commonwealth Poetry Prize; *Moonsongs* (1988); *Midlife* (1993); *Waiting Laughters* (1990), which won the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa; *Selected Poems* (1992); and *Pages from the Book of the Sun: New and Selected Poems* (2002). His poems have been translated into French, Dutch, Spanish, Japanese, and Korean. Following a successful career as full professor and head of the English department at the University of Ibadan, he relocated to Louisiana, where he is currently a tenured full professor of English, African, and African American literature at the University of New Orleans.

**Jean-Joseph Rabéarivelo** was born in 1901 in Antananarivo, Madagascar's capital, and committed suicide in 1937, at the peak of his literary powers. Partly educated by his uncle, he later attended the Ecole des Frères des Ecoles Chrétiennes at Andohalo and the Collège Saint-Michel in Amparibe. A school dropout at thirteen, he drifted from one poor-paying job to another and ended up as a printer's proof-reader. Addicted to drugs and alcohol, he nevertheless read widely in the Western classics and became heavily influenced by the French symbolists and surrealists. His work is further enriched by *hain-teny*, the traditional sung poetry of the Merina people of Madagascar. He wrote fluently in both French and Spanish, publishing several volumes before his death, among them *Le Coupe de Cendres* (1924), *Sylves* (1927), *Volumes* (1928), *Presque-Songes* (1934), *Traduit de la nuit* (1935), and *Chants pour Abeone* (1937). His collection of *hain-teny*, Malagasy formalized dialogue or monologue love songs, was published posthumously as *Vieilles chansons des pays d'Imerina* in 1939. Besides French and Spanish, Rabéarivelo also composed some of his poems in his mother tongue, Hova, and translated them into French.

**Jacques Rabémananjara** was born in 1913 at Mangabe in Maroantsetra District, in Antongil Bay, on the east coast of Madagascar. Though he attended for the Grand Séminaire d'Antananarivo, a Jesuit college, he joined the French colonial administration. In 1939, he was sent to the French Colonial Ministry for training, but, forced to remain in France during the occupation, he studied literature at the Sorbonne. Upon his return to Madagascar, he was elected *député* in 1946, and in 1947, as a leader of the Democratic Movement for the Renewal of Madagascar, he was arrested, charged with inciting revolt against France, and sentenced to death, but his sentence was commuted to forced labor instead. A pillar of the Negritude movement, his volumes of poetry include *Sur les marches du soir* (1940), *Antidotes* (1947), *Rites millénaires* (1955), *Antsa* (1956), *Lamba* (1956), *Les ordalies* (1972), *Oeuvres complètes, poésie* (1978), *Thrènes d'avant l'aurore: Madagascar* (1985), and *Rien qu'encens et filigrane* (1987). He also published volumes of essays and plays. He served as minister and vice president of Madagascar. Following the 1972 coup d'état, he lived in Paris until his death in 2005.

**Flavien Ranaivo** was born in 1914 in Arivonimamo, Madagascar, and died in 1999 in Troyes, France. A love poet, he repaid his debt to the exquisite traditional *hain-teny* sung poetry of Malagasy with some of the most innovative poems in African literature. He was deeply rooted in the earth and folklore of Madagascar. For a period he was minister of information in the government. He published several volumes of his poems in French: *L'Ombre et Le Vent* (1947), *Mes Chansons de toujours* (1955), and *Le Retour au bercail* (1962).

**Shaaban Robert** was born in 1909 in Vibambani Village, about six miles south of Tanga, and died in 1962 in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Though a Yao of Mozambican and perhaps also Malawian origin, he was one of the most important modernist Swahili poets. The son of a Yao healer who migrated to Tanganyika at the early part of the twentieth century, Shaaban Robert preferred to be known as a Swahili. In 1926, following his studies at Msimbazi School in Dar es Salaam, he was among the first Tanganyikan students to pass the School Leaving Certificate Examinations and became a customs officer from 1926 to 1944. Married three times, he fathered ten children, five of whom were alive at the time of his death. Rightly called the “foster-father of Swahili” by his compatriot Matias Mnyampala, or as the *Shaha*—“king” or laureate—of modern Swahili poets, his major works include such epic poems as *Mwafrika Aimba* (1949), *Marudi Mema* (1952), and *Vita Vya Uhuru* (1967); his autobiography, *Maisha Yangu*; and *Kufikirika* (1961) and *Wasifu Wa Siti Binti Saad* (1967). He also edited the works of Mwana Kupona Msham, a major Swahili woman poet. His oeuvre consists of twenty-two books of essays, prose, and poetry, some of which have been translated into English, Russian, and Chinese. Robert was in the avant-garde of Tanganyikan writers who argued for the need to develop the Swahili language. He served on the East African Swahili Committee for many years, becoming its chairman in 1961, the year he was awarded the Margaret Wrong Memorial Prize.

**David Rubadiri**, pioneer Malawian poet, was born in 1930. After a long association with East Africa, he has finally returned to Malawi. After high school at Kings College, Budo, in Uganda, he studied at Makerere, Bristol, and Cambridge universities. He later taught at Makerere, Nairobi, Ife, and Gaborone. After serving his second term as Malawi’s ambassador to the United Nations in New York, he became vice chancellor of the University of Malawi in Zomba until his retirement from public service in 2005. A veteran African poet whose work has appeared in numerous international journals and anthologies, Rubadiri has only recently published his poems in a single slim volume, *An African Thunderstorm and Other Poems* (2004). His anthologies include *Poems from East Africa* (1972), coedited with David Cook, and *Growing Up with Poetry* (1994). His novel, *No Bride Price* (1967), is one of the most serious fictional works from Malawi.

**Tijan M. Sallah** was born in 1958 in Sere Kunda, Gambia. After his secondary school education there, he studied at Berea College and the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, where he was awarded a Ph.D. in economics. Following a distinguished teaching career in various U.S. universities, Sallah joined the World Bank, where he currently works. Regarded as the most significant Gambian poet after Lenrie Peters, his poetry books include *When Africa Was a Young Woman* (1980), *Kora Land* (1989), *Dreams of Dusty Roads* (1993), and *Dream Kingdom: New and Selected Poems* (2007). He has also edited and coedited *New Poets of West Africa* (1999) and, with Tanure Ojaide, *The New African Poetry* (2000).

**Léopold Sédar Senghor** was born in 1906 into a large family in Joal, Senegal. He was educated in Catholic mission schools in a largely Muslim country and later in Paris, where he met Aimé Césaire and Léon Damas, with whom he founded the Negritude movement, a controversial though historically important phenomenon in African literature. A member of the French Academy, he was one of the most decorated and celebrated African poets. He was both the first president of independent Senegal and the first African president to relinquish power voluntarily and peacefully when he retired on December 31, 1980, after twenty years in power. Some of his books are *Chants d'ombre* (1945), *Hostie noires* (1948), *Nocturnes* (1961), and the landmark 1948 *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache*. He was also the author of the lyrics of Senegal's national anthem, "Pincez Tous vos Koras, Frappez les Balafons." He spent his last years in Normandy, France, where he died in 2001, but was buried in his village of Joal, in Senegal.

**Abdul Hakim Mahmoud El-Sheikh** was born in 1966 in Eritrea. Poet and journalist, he won Eritrea's Raimok Prize for Arabic poetry in 1997. One of the most promising young Eritrean poets, he died in a fire in 1998, at the height of his poetic career. "Breaths of Saffron on Broken Mirrors" was first published in 1994.

**Ribka Sibhatu** was born in 1956 in Eritrea. Poet, critic, and scholar with a Ph.D. in communication studies from the University of Rome, she works as an intercultural consultant in Italy, and she writes poetry in Tigrinya and Italian. "Abeba" is from her bilingual book, *Auld: Cantopoesia dall'Eritrea* (1993).

**Adam Small** was born in 1936 in Wellington, Cape Town, South Africa. Educated at the universities of the Western Cape, London, and Oxford, where he obtained his Ph.D. in philosophy in 1963, Small is a leading South African intellectual, poet, philosopher, and playwright. Now retired, he has taught philosophy at Fort Hare and in the School of Social Work at the University of the Western Cape. His poetic output spans the turbulent decades of apartheid, which he resisted through his poetry written in the subversive Kaaps dialect that enabled Black Afrikaans

poets to reach the working-class people of the Cape and beyond. His volumes of poetry—*Verse van die liefde* (1957), *Kitaar my Kruis* (1961), *Sê sjibbolet* (1963), *Kanna hy kô hystoe* (1965), *Oos tuis bes Distrik Ses* (1973), and *Krismis van Map Jacobs* (1983)—constitute a very important seam in the rich and complex South African literary canon. He has demonstrated his versatility as a poet by writing vivid poems in both Afrikaans and English, including *Black, Bronze, Beautiful: Quatrains* (1975). His work appears in numerous journals and anthologies.

**Benedict W. Vilakazi**, born in 1906 at Groutville Mission in KwaZulu-Natal Province, holds the distinction of being the first black South African to be awarded the Ph.D. degree. Though named Bambatha ka Mshini, he changed his name to the current one following his family's conversion to the Roman Catholic faith. After obtaining his "candlelight" B.A. by correspondence from the University of South Africa, he became the first black South African to teach at the University of Witwatersrand. He died in 1947, soon after completing his doctoral dissertation entitled "The Oral and Written Literature of the Nguni." His literary achievements include three isiZulu language novels, though his fame rests on his two seminal volumes of poetry, *Inkondlo KaZulu* (1935) and *Amal' eZulu* (1945). Vilakazi was also an active member of the South African ANC, working closely with Chief Albert Luthuli, the first African Nobel laureate and president of the ANC; John L. Dube, the famed journalist; and others.

**Patricia Jabbeh Wesley** was born in Maryland County, Liberia. She was educated at the prestigious College of West Africa (high school); the University of Liberia; Indiana University, Bloomington; and Western Michigan University, where she obtained her Ph.D. in English and creative writing. Her award-winning poetry volumes include *Before the Palm Could Bloom: Poems of Africa* (1998); *Becoming Ebony* (2003), which won a 2002 Crab Orchard Award in the Second Book Poetry Open Competition; and *The River Is Rising* (2007). Her work has appeared in many literary journals and anthologies in the United States and internationally. She has lived in the U.S.A. since 1991, having fled the Liberian civil war. She currently teaches literature and creative writing at Penn State University in Altoona, Pennsylvania.

**Dan Wylie** was born in Bulawayo but was raised and educated in Mutare, Zimbabwe. He holds a doctorate from Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa, where he is currently a lecturer in English. Winner of the 1998 Ingrid Jonker Memorial Prize for his first book of poems, *The Road Out* (1996), he has also published *Savage Delight: White Myths of Shaka* (2001), *Dead Leaves: Two Years in the Rhodesian War* (2002), and *Myth of Iron: Shaka in History* (2006).

## POETRY

"Playful and stricken, chaste and tender, incantatory and wild, formal and abandoned, here is love up close, our universal malady, our greatest blessing. Ranging over more than three thousand African years, this is a truly wonderful anthology."

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**Frank M. Chipasula**, Judge William Holmes Cook Professor of Black American Studies at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, is the author, editor, or coeditor of seven books, including *When My Brothers Come Home: Poems from Central and Southern Africa* and *The Heinemann Book of African Women's Poetry*. His own poems have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies.



Heleen C. Chipasula

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